

## Understanding Russian Communication Strategy: Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia

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ifa Edition Culture and Foreign Policy

# Understanding Russian Communication Strategy

Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia

Stefan Meister (ed.)



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## Foreword

Fake news, hate speech, bots and propaganda repress more and more the advantages of the internet, social media and free, transnational information flows. Especially the influence of Russia on foreign publics and the public opinion has been brought into the focus of global media since the US presidential election of 2016. Which instruments, narratives and strategies are used in Russian communication policies? Who are the main target groups? Where are their vulnerabilities? What impact does the Russian communication strategy have in selected countries such as Serbia and Estonia? How is the German support strategy in Estonia perceived? How should Germany's foreign cultural policy respond?

The authors of this study precisely describe the current media landscape in Serbia and Estonia, the Russian influence on the public opinion in these countries and possible actions for European and German communication strategies. The study forms part of ifa's Research Programme "Culture and Foreign Policy", in which experts address relevant issues relating to culture and foreign policy with the aim of involving academics, practitioners, policymakers and the civil society.

I would like to thank the editor Stefan Meister (DGAP) for his excellent work and commitment to this research project. Special thanks also go to the authors of the case studies Juulia Barthel (DGAP), Ruslan Stefanov and Martin Vladimirov (CSD – Center for the Study of Democracy) for their invaluable insights. In addition, I thank my ifa colleagues Odila Triebel, Sarah Widmaier and Anja Schön for their work on the coordination and editing of this project.

The ifa is committed to peaceful and enriching coexistence between people and cultures worldwide. We promote art and cultural exchange in exhibitions, dialogue and conference programmes. As a competence centre for international cultural relations, ifa connects civil societies, cultural practices, art, media and science. Adequate politics need to be grounded on evidence and have to be reflected systematically. In times of shrinking free and liberal spaces in many societies, not only online, we have to understand the mechanisms behind and develop possible strategies to preserve those spaces with arts and culture for critical reflection, dialogue and international cooperation.

**Ronald Grätz**

Secretary General, ifa

## Abstract

As a part of Russian soft (or coercive) power disinformation and propaganda have become key elements in an updated Russian security policy since 2012/13. For Russian leadership disinformation and propaganda have become key instruments to impact domestic debates in EU member states and in the neighbourhood of the EU. This policy aims to weaken cohesion in the EU and its image in the neighbourhood and has become so successful because of the shrinking self-confidence of Western democracies. This study analyses Russia's communication strategy with regard to its influence in Serbia and Estonia. What are the tools that are used? What are the aims behind disinformation and fake news stories? It shows that a formerly reactive response from a perceived position of weakness has turned into a well-executed communication strategy that makes use of vulnerabilities to sow discord. National elites in the target countries play a key role for the success or failure of this policy.



## **I. Russian communication strategy: aims, instruments, stakeholders of disinformation and propaganda *by Stefan Meister***

### **1. The background of Russia's disinformation campaign**

Russia is a latecomer in developing an updated strategy on shaping the global information sphere in the 21st century, unlike in that of cyberattacks, which have been instruments of its security policy since the 2000s (e.g. Estonia 2007). The Kremlin failed to dominate the national or international discourse on domestic issues like the Beslan terror attack in 2004, in its post-Soviet neighbourhood during the Russian-Georgian war in 2008 or during the Sochi Olympic Games in 2014. The catalyst for a more comprehensive information strategy was a domestic event with the mass demonstrations in Moscow and St. Petersburg in 2011/12 in the context of the parliamentary and presidential elections. The regime interpreted them as being inspired from the outside, mainly by the United States. The rise of social networks, Western support for NGOs and independent media, public support for the demonstrators by many EU- and US-officials had a strong impact on the development of a Russian communication policy towards Western interference in the Russian public sphere. This was the moment when Russia started to invest heavily in a disinformation, propaganda and cyber strategy based on the view that in the 21st century traditional security policy has to be linked with the domination and manipulation of the information sphere.

Much had been tested during the Cold War; the Soviet Union had huge experience in the areas of propaganda, disinformation, fake news and subversion. But the digital era gave Russian security and intelligence services new instruments to undermine the credibility of the West without the need to offer an alternative model. Furthermore, the crisis of liberal democracies from within made Russian disinformation and propaganda much more powerful than during the Cold War, when the Western camp was more united and resilient. In the digital age the public in open societies seems to be much more vulnerable to the manipulation of information and to half-true or conspiracy theories.

As a part of Russian soft (or coercive) power disinformation and propaganda have been updated in Russian security policy (Sherr 2013). Both terms overlap, are fuzzy in their definition and heavily influenced by a Cold War understanding, but have transformed into the digital era. Propaganda can be defined as the use of arguments or information selectively to either advance or undermine a political or public actor or achieve a political goal. It can have a positive or negative focus, depending on the goal. Disinformation describes politically motivated messaging designed explicitly to generate public

cynicism, uncertainty, distrust, and conspiracy, all of which undermines citizen trust or confuses the public. Fake news are intentionally created non exiting stories or facts with the aim to discredit a politician, state or institutions. Disinformation is mostly not fake news, because it is based at least partly on facts or just drops parts of the story. It fosters a special version of a story or events that could trigger a political reaction. Both are used in Estonia and Serbia. While in Estonia it should create distrust under the Russian-speaking minority towards the Estonian state, in Serbia it is targeted against NATO and the EU. Disinformation is not necessarily composed of outright lies or fabrications, it can be composed of mostly true facts, stripped of context or blended with falsehoods to support the intended message.

Russian disinformation and propaganda are part of the security strategy and of the hybrid warfare that should support the military strategy in times of a cold or hot war. It was updated by the Russian general staff and intelligence services in 2012/13 after the return of Vladimir Putin in his third presidential term. Feeling under attack by the West, Russia's leadership reacted from a position of weakness, using cyberattacks and disinformation to counter Western soft power and to compensate for conventional strategic weakness. The colour revolutions in post-Soviet countries together with the mass demonstration of 2011/12 in Russia are the main drivers for the perception of vulnerability and threat by Russia's leadership, but it is also a reaction to the more general impression that the West is waging a media war and uses NGOs to prepare for a regime change in Russia.

The Russian authorities therefore see their policy as a tit-for-tat response to Western activities; they argue that their campaign is not different to what everybody else is doing. However, while Russia had much more of a reactive strategy in the beginning, since this has been so successful in confusing Western governments and societies, a more proactive approach has been developed. This includes a shift of Russian international media outlets like RT and Sputnik from presenting a positive picture of Russia to the world to giving a different perspective on negative developments in Europe and the US trough disinformation and propaganda. Manipulation of public opinion in the West via social networks, troll factories, and bot nets while boosting anti-US, anti-NATO, and anti-elite narratives are part of this policy.

## 2. Aims and functioning

Russia's disinformation strategy functions by trial and error. It is tailor-made to every target country and group, focusing on the narratives and bad news that work best in any particular environment. Many of the instruments used to influence publics and to discredit politicians, experts, institutions and the media in the West have been tested before in Russia and the post-Soviet countries.

The post-Soviet Russian media was developed first of all as a system of public relations for the ruling elites. All mainstream Russian media is owned by the Russian state, by big state companies like Gazprom media or by oligarchs mostly close to president Putin. It lacks an ethos of balanced information, fact checking, difference between opinion and facts or an understanding of itself as the Fourth Estate in a democracy. Much has been learned from Western public-relations agencies or from TV channels like Fox News in the United States with its aggressive and biased approach. It is a self-learning system in which actors test and train what works best to have impact and implement it independently in a framework that is set by the leadership or client. At home and abroad, the system often operates in a public-private partnership with Russian oligarchs or businessmen as well as through the co-opting of "independent" hackers by the intelligence agencies. This often makes it more difficult to backtrack if Russian state institutions are behind a special attack or campaign. Especially in countries with weak institutions, corrupt elites and a symbiotic relationship between politics and business, it is much easier for Russian actors to influence public debate.

The main aim of Russia's disinformation strategy in Europe and the US is not, above all, to help elect Kremlin-friendly politicians (even if this seemed to be the case in France with François Fillon in 2017 or in the Czech Republic with Miloš Zeman in 2018 where the impression was created, that Russian propaganda, disinformation and fake news can make a difference); it is more to undermine the credibility of governments and politicians as well as to disrupt the functioning of democratic institutions or the media. For example, the Russian media and hackers use cyberattacks to obtain information about leaders they consider opponents and make it public via WikiLeaks and other websites, or they create fake stories like in the case of Hillary Clinton in 2016. But more substantially these actions are about the fundamental pillars of open societies and the trust of the people in their institutions, politicians and media. The strategy is to fuel already existing resentments, stereotypes and vulnerabilities in European and Western societies but not to create them.

Russian disinformation, propaganda and subversion seems to be more successful than in Cold War times, because the insecurity, self-confidence and trust in institutions in the West are much lower today than they were during the Cold War. Furthermore, it is much easier to spread fake stories and conspiracy through social networks today.

This is especially successful in countries with weak institutions, oligarchic structures, underfunded and politicised media, corruption and the symbiotic relationship between politics and the economy like in the Balkans or in Southern Europe. To undermine the credibility of the EU or NATO, to play with resentments in societies or fuel nationalism are part of the policy. In countries where populists already challenge the trust in institutions, in “the establishment” and in the media it is much easier for Russian disinformation and propaganda to further explore these vulnerabilities and to team up with populists. For Russian actors in this field it is not important whether the challengers of the system are right- or left-wing populists, the political or ideological orientation does not play any role, every actor who weakens the ruling systems and helps to undermine confidence in liberal democracies is welcomed as a partner.

On the other hand, often underestimated in Europe, the Kremlin’s policy is very much about showing the Russian audience that the West is no alternative to the Putin system – however dysfunctional, unreliable and riddled with deficits – and that it is good to have Putin as a president who at least guarantees stability. This means, that the aforementioned policy is also regime stabilising and legitimising in times of an ongoing economic crisis and lack of reforms in Russian domestic politics. Simultaneously, it is about globally building up an alternative paradigm to the Western liberal value system. Russia’s disinformation accentuates the existing weaknesses of European and Western states and societies.<sup>1</sup> Social media is key in this strategy and Russian-funded media outlets are up to date with all the tools of the internet age. It is much cheaper to irritate the counterpart and to improve one’s own bargaining position with an updated and aggressive (dis)information strategy than with any conventional weapons system.

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<sup>1</sup> But we should bear in mind that this is not an exclusive strategy by the Russian state but also by other actors like China and Iran. They often act in the shadow of the huge attention focused on Russia.

### 3. Tools and means of Russian influence and disinformation

The EU countries and its neighbours are important targets of Russian disinformation and cyberattacks, where different instruments are used and adapted to the national and regional environment. These instruments of Russian disinformation are:

- Russian foreign media outlets like Russia Today (RT) and its national branches, the media platform *Sputnik* including its radio station, internet and social media content.
- Internet trolls who manipulate social networks and discussions in the mainstream media, bot nets partly operating from Russia or countries not linked to the target country which often operate for private companies that are owned by businessmen close to the Russian leadership.
- Cyber operations by Russian security services, especially the military intelligence agency (GRU), which work with co-opted hacker groups like “Fancy Bear” in cyberattacks to gather sensitive information, often about politicians, that is then used to manipulate public opinion, especially in the context of elections.
- Increasing political connections with left- and right-wing populist parties, nationalistic politicians and groups in Europe through parliaments, think tanks or funding instruments like the Gorchakov Foundation.
- Putin- and Russia-friendly national and regional networks that have been built up in the last 15 years, which now argue for lifting sanctions and recognising the annexation of Crimea, and repeat arguments of Russian propaganda, for instance against Ukraine or about US influence.
- Companies or their lobby organisations that cooperate with Russian (state) companies, especially in the energy sector.
- NGOs and GONGOs<sup>2</sup> like cultural institutions, organisations like the Russian World Foundation, the Gorchakov Foundation or institutions like the Dialogue of Civilizations (DOC) Research Institute in Berlin (also privately owned) who fund or cooperate with pro-Kremlin networks or help to create them.

Russia’s international media is in itself not the most successful instrument of disinformation in European countries; it is often a niche product (this is not the case for instance in Serbia but true for Estonia) targeting particular groups. Much more important is the growing reflection and distribution of the content this media produces by populist groups, parties, and social movements in the target countries and also the instrumentalisation of Russian-speaking minorities as in the case of Estonia or Germany. If they are not

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<sup>2</sup> Government-organised non-governmental organisation.

the direct target of the disinformation strategy, the content of Russian disinformation and propaganda is spread through these groups and networks with increasing success. At the same time, members of parties, but also leaders in some European countries, use arguments of Russian disinformation and propaganda, while pro-Kremlin former politicians, journalists, or pseudo-experts bring them into the mainstream media via interviews or talk-show appearances.

At the same time, there is a Kremlin policy to increasingly connect right-wing populist, anti-liberal groups with Russian institutions and actors. The Russian philosopher and publicist Alexander Dugin – a key player in Russian intellectual debates about conservative national values, Russia's unique civilisation, and Eurasianism – has a crucial role to play here. He is used frequently by the Kremlin's spin doctors to develop and maintain conservative networks abroad and shape the discussion on values and Russia's role in the world at home (Shekhovtsov 2018). Dugin has comprehensive links with right-wing groups across Europe: for instance, in Greece (Golden Dawn) and in Hungary (Jobbik). He regularly travels to Serbia and speaks in other Balkan countries to media and the public (Balkan Insight 2018).

Furthermore, we should not underestimate Russia's policy towards Russian-speaking minorities abroad in the context of its *Russkij Mir* – Russian world – institutions and policy. Part of the Russian world are all people who "speak, think and feel Russian", which gives a very broad and fuzzy definition for groups which belong to Russia (Laruelle 2015). Russian leadership reserves the role to protect the rights and security of these groups everywhere in the world. This is linked to a cultural, language and religious policy in which the *Russkij Mir* Foundation and the Russian Orthodox Church play a key role. They also spread the narratives of Russian disinformation and are agents of the official state policy. The Orthodox Church is key in the formulation and spreading of Russian leadership's values and foreign policy towards the Orthodox World which argues against the Western liberal way of living, for traditional family, against LGBT rights or the needs of minorities. It is very active also in Serbia. Here Putin's conservatism builds bridges with conservative and right-wing groups in Europe and the USA.

The main challenge is not that Russia's media and security services have highly sophisticated new instruments to influence the European public. It is how they use and promote existing anti-US, anti-EU, anti-media, anti-establishment, and anti-migrant feelings. Most elements of the narratives pushed by Russia already exist in growing parts of European societies, which criticise the inability of the governing elites to solve their coun-

tries' problems in a more and more complex world. This self-doubt is supported by Russia's international media, whose main goal is to "build up a counter-public as well as show media manipulation".<sup>3</sup> With this policy Russia instigates instability and polarisation in societies to claim power in the name of restoring stability.

#### 4. Challenges for EU response

We have to bear in mind that European decision-makers interpret the threat of Russian disinformation for their domestic situation in very different ways. Countries which are geographically close to Russia – like the Baltic states, Poland, Sweden and Finland – have much earlier interpreted Russian disinformation as a direct threat (and were an earlier target of Russian disinformation campaigns). Thus they were faster to react with counter-measures than other EU member states. Governments of countries with a different tradition in dealing with Russia like Germany, France, Austria and Italy reacted to the Russian disinformation campaign much later, only slowly adapted their policy and developed counter-measures like in Germany after the Lisa case in January 2016. This differs even more in countries like Hungary, Greece or Serbia, where elites have direct business interest with Russia, the media system is mostly owned by business people close to the political leadership, corruption and weak law enforcement institutions exist more widely and societies are more receptive to Russian propaganda.

Furthermore, Russian policy in this field links foreign, domestic and security policy. In Western bureaucratic systems, every ministry has its own tasks which makes it difficult to pool coordination and responsibility. It is often very difficult to respond fast to fake news or a disinformation campaign because there is no institution or actor who has an overview or a supervising function and can act with all existing instruments. The success story of the Finish case is linked to the early decision to set up a person at the Prime Minister's office who has the know-how and resources to react to any disinformation attack on the state. This person supervises all activities, has direct access to the top level of the state and can give very fast statements to demask disinformation campaigns or fake news.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. the self-description of RTdeutsch which wants to show the "missing part", namely the information that is normally "withheld or cut off" in the so-called "mainstream media". RTdeutsch, Über uns. Available at: <https://deutsch.rt.com/uber-uns/> [21 August 2018].

## 5. Case studies: Estonia and Serbia

The following two case study countries, Estonia and Serbia, offer very different political, social and economic environments. This naturally calls for different tools, narratives and strategies of Russian influence on the public discourse.

Estonia is part of the EU, with a very EU- and NATO-friendly society, a success story in economic reforms and digitalisation. At the same time, more than 25 percent of the population are ethnic Russians, which live concentrated in the Eastern part of the country, close to the Russian border with a share of up to 90 percent of the local population and in the capital Tallinn with up to 40 percent (cf. Włodarska-Frykowska 2016). This group consumes Russian media directly, informs itself on the Russian-speaking internet and is therefore a much easier target of Russian disinformation and propaganda. The ethnic Estonian majority of society is rather Russia-critical, sees the big neighbour as a security risk and agrees with the importance of the integration into the transatlantic structures to protect the security and economic development of the country.

Serbian society historically has – through the Orthodox Church and Slavic ethnicity – positive sentiments towards Russia. Good relations with Russia are very popular in society and elites and the frustration about the slow progress of EU integration is growing. With the background of NATO bombings of former Yugoslavia, tensions with other ethnic groups and the rejection of the independence of Kosovo by many Serbs are important issues which are easily explored by Russian (foreign) media outlets and actors like *Sputnik* and RT. Russian business ties with Serbia play an important role, Gazprom owns the majority of the biggest energy company and is the biggest tax payer, even if trade is by far not as important with Russia as with the EU. Important is the image of Russia as a supporter of Serbia, which is raised in Russian foreign media outlets as well as Serbian Kremlin-friendly media. The failure of the political elites to fight corruption, the existence of weak institutions and the lack of perspective especially for the younger generation combined with fuelled sentiments in society caused by nationalistic politicians against NATO, the US, EU-influence and minorities create an environment for Kremlin-friendly narratives.



## **II. Russian influence on the media: a case study of Serbia *by Ruslan Stefanov and Martin Vladimirov*<sup>4</sup>**

### **1. Introduction**

The Kremlin's support for Serbia's cause in Kosovo and Russia's rejection of Kosovo's independence have been the cornerstone of Russia's positive image and strong political leverage in Serbia in its most recent history. Russia has tried to carefully craft and amplify this image through strong political presence at the highest level and through a network of communication and media channels dedicated to promoting its image in Serbia and to fostering feelings of proximity and a shared vision of international relations in the Western Balkans. This study provides an overview of Russian ownership in the Serbian media sector, discusses Russian media presence and influence on the local media landscape and outlines the key messages and narratives promoted by Russia in the country. It discusses the main actors and target groups on the Serbian side.

Over the last decade, Russia has been committed to increasing its political and economic leverage in the Balkans. Russian companies have taken advantage of the gap left by withdrawing European capital after the start of the 2008 economic recession to take over some of the most lucrative assets in the region. In Serbia, in particular, Russia has leveraged its political support for the denial of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 to sign a long-term energy agreement to acquire the country's largest company and to lock-in the country in long-term gas supply contracts and the South Stream mega project.<sup>5</sup>

As is stated in the 2013 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, the Balkan region is of great geostrategic importance for Moscow, due to historical and cultural ties, as well as its role as a potential economic hub linked to Western and Central Europe. In this respect, sharing what is perceived as similar ethnic and religious origins with Russia, with its size and global position, Russia sees Serbia as a key pillar of its interests in the

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<sup>4</sup> CSD (Center for the Study of Democracy) would like to thank Nikola Burazer, Programme Director at the Centre for Contemporary Politics and Executive Editor at European Western Balkans, and Nemanja T. Štiblija as Executive Director at the Centre for Contemporary Politics and Editor-in-Chief at European Western Balkans for their insightful comments and edits, and Eva Juric, CSD's intern on Russian influence.

<sup>5</sup> South Stream is a 63-bcm/yr Gazprom-led pipeline planned to transport natural gas from Russia through the Black Sea, Bulgaria, Serbia, Hungary and Austria. The project was abandoned by Russia after EU objections against the related inter-governmental contracts and public procurement procedures, which were contradictory to the EU's competition and energy law.

Western Balkans. In Serbia, Russia did not need to build up its economic power as leverage to exercise its political influence. On the contrary, it has had an open door in terms of political cooperation resulting in important economic gains for Russia's energy majors (Conley/Stefanov/Vladimirov/Mina 2016).

Russia's economic and political strategy in Serbia has been amplified by the extensive use of soft power instruments that became increasingly potent after 2013. Traditional pro-Russian and pan-Slavic attitudes in Serbia have been strengthened by targeted pro-Russian media campaigns and the socio-political activism of pro-Russian groups in the country. The strong Rusophile base in Serbia is enabling the penetration of Russian information and disinformation narratives either directly through Russia-owned or indirectly through pro-Russian media outlets (which often happen to be pro-governmental with regard to the Serbian executive too). Such outlets have promoted the Russian version of world events through different means, e.g. providing free Russian media content, emphasising perceived Russian strengths or denouncing perceived Western weaknesses, appealing to Serbian nationalist feelings, etc.

Russia-owned media in Serbia and pro-Russian local outlets have used both propaganda and disinformation to achieve political influence. Although the two soft power terms are sometimes used interchangeably, they define two slightly different strategies. Russian propaganda uses information selectively to achieve the desired political effect of Serbian government support for Russian policies in the country and the region. It could have a positive or negative connotation depending on the goal. The disinformation narratives, on the other hand, are more methodically designed to create public cynicism, distrust and generally confuse public opinion. Disinformation is rarely fake news in the sense that the facts cited in articles are at least partially true but are taken out of context or are blended in with false arguments with the goal of fostering a certain version of events that could trigger a particular political response. Russian disinformation has been masterfully used in Serbia to sow distrust of the EU and NATO by distorting Western political messages, shifting the blame for unsuccessful domestic reforms, inspiring conspiracy theories about the true intent of Euro-Atlantic institutions and providing counterarguments to the key points behind the support for Euro-Atlantic integration.

## 2. The Russian corporate footprint and influence in the Serbian media

### 2.1 The deterioration of the Serbian media environment

Over the past decade, the Serbian media sector has undergone a profound transformation. The state has used various mechanisms to gain influence over content and coverage. This influence in most cases has not applied to the government as a whole, but to specific individuals from the ruling coalition (Čeperković 2016). The government has allowed the media market to be run in a non-competitive and non-transparent manner tolerating the concentration of ownership in the hands of a few politically-related companies and the deterioration of ethical standards and journalistic professionalism. By neglecting the legal framework, the state has paralysed the relevant controlling institutions including the electronic media regulator. At the same time, self-regulatory bodies, such as the Press Council, have been ineffective in fostering journalistic professionalism and ensuring objective reporting.

Opaque and incomplete privatisation has left many outlets under direct control of the state. The process, that started effectively only in 2014, has led to the shut-down of more than 30 outlets, leaving some 1,000 journalists out of work, and the sector demoralised. The swift process resulted in the rise of local media-moguls such as Radoica Milosajević who purchased eight media outlets during privatisation. Two prominent newspapers, *Politika* and *Večernje Novosti*, have remained state-run.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, the national news agency, Tanjug, although officially shut down in November 2015, still invoices its services and receives commercial contracts from state institutions, rendering its status insecure and easily controllable.<sup>7</sup>

The difficult economic situation of Serbian media outlets makes them vulnerable to political pressure as the media market depends heavily on state advertising. The public authorities' advertising budget reached EUR 174 million in 2016, the highest on record in the country.<sup>8</sup> Lack of transparency on criteria for allocating state aid allows for the government to exert a hold on media outlets and push them to voice a pro-government agen-

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<sup>6</sup> Reporters Without Borders, Media Ownership Monitor, Serbia, available at: <http://serbia.mom-rsf.org/> [21 August 2018].

<sup>7</sup> Euractiv, Closed Serbian news agency with ties to government still publishing, 12/01/2016, available at: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/closed-serbian-news-agency-with-ties-to-government-still-publishing/> [21 August 2018].

<sup>8</sup> Reporters Without Borders, Media Ownership Monitor, available at: <https://serbia.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/advertising-market/> [21 August 2018].

da. At the same time, economic pressure is put on non-compliant media by selective tax procedures.<sup>9</sup>

Russia has also taken advantage of the worsened environment and low trust in the Serbian media. The damaging deteriorating trust in media in Serbia has been the product of low media freedom, lack of transparency about ownership and financing, and the more general phenomenon of overall distrust in institutions, including due to the conflicting world-views and values of readers/viewers and those prevailing in the media. The loss of trust in media has also been the result of decades of, first, socialist, and then, during the 1990s, nationalist propaganda that has made Serbs sceptical about the media in general. The trend has accelerated in the past ten years as traditional media with high-quality content has gradually been replaced by outlets quickly processing information seeking to offer the easiest explanation to events in the real world. Russian propaganda has tapped into this loophole by offering abundant content free of charge to cash-strapped Serbian media looking to minimise costs and replace classical advertising revenues with the pay-per-click marketing model that relies on maximising viewership.

Besides state advertising,<sup>10</sup> another important mechanism of state control over the media in Serbia has been project-based funding through local municipalities, including journalistic grant awards to tabloids (Independent Association of Serbian Reporters 2018). Many media owners in Serbia are either directly connected to the ruling elite or are known to have adopted a pro-government editorial line to ensure their owner's business prosperity.<sup>11</sup> This trend became more apparent after the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) of current president Aleksandar Vučić came to power in 2012. The tabloidisation of the media market that saw the quick transformation of several new yellow newspapers in the dailies with the biggest circulation in the country, such as *Informer* (2012) and *Srpski telegraf* (2016), and, at the same time, the non-transparent privatisation of regional and local media, has left just a handful of independent media sources in the country. The

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<sup>9</sup> Transparency International Serbia, Obracun sa Juznim vestima?, 07/08/2018, available at: <http://www.transparentnost.org.rs/index.php/sr/aktivnosti-2/pod-lupom/9930-obracun-sa-juznim-vestima> [21 August 2018].

<sup>10</sup> Transparency International Serbia, Inspectors pressuring Southern News and its advertisers in 2018, available at: <http://www.transparentnost.org.rs/index.php/sr/aktivnosti-2/pod-lupom/9930-obracun-sa-juznim-vestima> [21 August 2018]; Reporters Without Borders, the State is the biggest advertiser in the country, 2017, available at: <https://serbia.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/advertising-market/> [21 August 2018].

<sup>11</sup> Reporters Without Borders, Media Ownership Monitor, available at: <https://serbia.mom-rsf.org/en/findings/advertising-market/> [21 August 2018].

general public does not know who the real owners of the largest newspaper publishers or TV broadcasters are as they hide behind a chain of offshore companies. In this media landscape, fake news and propaganda have become the new normal enabling the perfect breeding ground for a Russian communication strategy.

## **2.2 Assessing Russian channels of influence in the Serbian media**

Russian entities directly or indirectly control around 12-13% of the Serbian economy, which, albeit showing significant presence especially in the energy and energy-intensive sectors, is still overshadowed by the EU-Serbia economic relationship, which makes up around three-quarters of the country's external trade and investment flows (Center for the Study of Democracy 2018). Taken as a whole, the EU has by far produced the biggest impact on the Serbian economic development in the past decade.

Until recently, Russian presence in the Serbian media sector was very limited. Direct Russian corporate ownership emerged for the first time in the spring of 2012, when the Russia-based company East Media Group (EMG) became the owner of 50% of the shares at the German media house *Westdeutsche Allgemeine Zeitung's* local branch (WAZ) – which was until then the publisher of *Politika*, one of the most influential mainstream newspapers in Serbia. The holder of the remaining 50% is the PJP company, which is owned by the Serbian state and some smaller shareholders (including the energy company NIS with 0.8%).

Although the true owner of EMG is not known, the Serbian businessman Miroslav Bogicevic, a long-time donor to the Democratic Party, is believed to have been the person behind the deal, which was part of an agreement between him and then-President Boris Tadic to prevent large Western publishers from buying *Politika*, and thus allowing the government to maintain key influence over one of the main players in the Serbian media market.<sup>12</sup> After SNS came to power in 2012, Ljiljana Smajlović, then-editor-in-chief of *Politika*, was removed from her position. She accused Aleksandar Vučić of personally controlling the newspaper and of ordering her removal (*Nedeljnik* 2016). The fact that Gazprom has been directly involved in the deal through its Serbian subsidiaries signals that Russia could potentially have a say in the editorial policy of one of the most reputable newspaper groups in the country.

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<sup>12</sup> BalkanInsight, available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/new-politika-owner-denies-links-with-democrats> [21 August 2018].

Apart from *Politika*, Russia has some small additional direct corporate footprint in the Serbian media sector. The Russian oil-company Lukoil, which has significant presence on the Serbian fuels distribution market, operates a small telecommunications company through an Austrian subsidiary, which could potentially be used for media purposes but this has not been the case thus far. Other Russian physical and legal entities also own Serbian SMEs and mid-caps (with an annual turnover of between one and five million euro) in the fields of telecommunication services, sound recording and music publishing, as well as web-portals. Throughout 2016 and 2017, information was circulating in the Serbian media and public domain that the EU- and US-sanctioned Russian businessman Konstantin Malofeev, who is a strong financial backer of pan-Slavic and Orthodox initiatives in South East Europe, had expressed potential interest to purchase a TV station, and potentially other local media. The pro-Russian businessman and current owner of the Nova TV channel, Bogoljub Karić, has also been associated with plans by Russian companies to take over key media outlets in Serbia. Pro-Russian businessmen have been another source of Russian influence on media in Serbia, avoiding direct corporate connection in the public eye.

However, Russia has had a very strong indirect influence in Serbian media, through providing free media content, advertising, etc. There are a considerable number of web news portals that have appeared since 2012 which openly promote Russian political and economic interests in Serbia. Nevertheless, direct evidence of Russian funding does not exist and these news portals are hosted in Serbia rather than Russia. Tracking the way influence is exerted is difficult as the majority of such outlets are not even registered in the official Media Registry, which is a clear violation of the Law on Media, which was reformed to include a registry in 2014. Some of the media channels with the highest number of web visits and a pro-Russian stance are *Novi Standard* ([www.standard.rs](http://www.standard.rs)), *Srbinfo* ([www.srbinfo.rs](http://www.srbinfo.rs)), *Vostok* ([www.vostok.rs](http://www.vostok.rs)), *Vaseljenska TV* ([www.vaseljenska.com](http://www.vaseljenska.com)), *Gazeta* ([www.vesti-gazeta.com](http://www.vesti-gazeta.com)), *Istina* ([www.ceopom-istina.rs](http://www.ceopom-istina.rs)) and *Kremlin* ([www.kremlin.rs](http://www.kremlin.rs)) (Center for the Study of Democracy 2018).

Some pro-Russian web-based outlets in Serbia have operated almost entirely in the shadows. Such is the case of the webpage of the Fund of Strategic Culture ([www.fsksr.rs](http://www.fsksr.rs)), which describes itself as a “Russian-Serbian Internet web portal that informs its readers in a timely manner about current events from Serbia, Russia, the countries of the Balkans and the former USSR, monitor and professionally analyse the political, security, economic and cultural circumstances that affect the position and future of the Serbian and Russian state”. According to the Serbian Business Registry, the Fund of Strategic Culture is not

registered at all, neither as an association, nor as a media outlet in Serbia, making its mode of financing and its accounts non-transparent. Similarly, the webpage News Front ([www.srb.news-front.info](http://www.srb.news-front.info)), which says that it is a portal where “soldiers-volunteers in the information front, are leading an unequal battle against cynical lies, deceit, manipulation and misinformation” cannot be found in any of the country’s registries. The web portal, which has an English, German, Serbian and Bulgarian edition, is updated on a daily basis and makes use of a sophisticated web interface. The majority of the texts published are translated from Russian to Serbian. Good quality of the web design and the vigorous publishing activity mean that these websites require a decent budget or at least a small team of journalists. However, no public information is available about their activities in the country.

As in many other countries, Russia has also established official state communications and public diplomacy channels in Serbia as part of its global image strategy. The monthly magazine *Russia Beyond the Headlines* (in English), devoted to promoting information about Russia and the Russian vision of the world, appears in Serbia under the name *Ruska reč*. It offers news, commentary, opinion and analysis on culture, politics, business, science, and public life in Russia. It is also part of the *Rossiya Segodnya* group of media outlets, which is owned by the Russian government, and also includes *Sputnik*. The printed edition of *Ruska reč* is distributed through the Serbian weekly news magazine *Nedeljnik*. The same publisher used to periodically distribute the magazine, *Rusija i Srbija*, as part of the right-wing, pro-Russian magazine, *Geopolitika*, until the winter of 2015.

### 2.3 The case of Sputnik

The most significant Russian involvement in the Serbian media sector has been the arrival of the Russian news agency, *Sputnik*, in 2015<sup>13</sup>, when it opened a regional office in Belgrade. *Sputnik*’s predecessor was the web portal *Voice of Russia*, which used to broadcast a daily radio programme on several Serbian radio stations. The most important broadcast was via *Radio Fokus*, which was one of the several radio stations that obtained national coverage in 2006. *Sputnik* operates on the premises of Informatika AD Beograd<sup>14</sup> but, similarly to its operations in other countries, it is not registered as a Serbian legal entity.

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<sup>13</sup> The editor-in-chief of *Sputnik* in Serbia is Ljubinka Milinčić, the former Serbian attaché for culture in the Serbian Embassy in Moscow (2002- 2006), and later Moscow correspondent of various Serbian media.

<sup>14</sup> Informatika is a Serbian company which has been a major provider of IT services in Russia. The company grew during the time of Slobodan Milošević, when it first established its presence in Russia which

*Radio Sputnik* operates in Serbian and has several radio shows: Sputnik News, World with Sputnik, Orbit of Culture, Sputnik Interview, Energy Sputnik, New Sputnik Order and From Thursday to Thursday. In Serbia *Radio Sputnik* is broadcast on Belgrade based *Radio Novosti*, a privately owned radio station with a licence for broadcasting the aforementioned programme in the territory of the city of Belgrade. *Radio Novosti* is owned by several journalists: Milan Đordjević - 23.75%, Ratomir Krsić - 23.75%, Vladan Samardžić - 23.75% and Andrija Dobrijević - 23.75% with a small number of shares belonging to the previous owner – daily newspaper *Novosti* - 5%. Every day *Radio Novosti* broadcasts at least five *Radio Sputnik* shows. *Radio Novosti* has a partnership network of around 30 regional and local radio stations across Serbia, which rebroadcast the programme of *Radio Novosti* and *Radio Sputnik*. These radio stations cover almost the whole territory of Serbia. Apart from their radio programme, Sputnik runs an influential news web portal in Serbian. Its published content is a free source, which means that other media can and do republish articles without requesting explicit permission as long as *Sputnik* is cited or credited. Moreover, what makes Sputnik so successful is its serious social media presence and its interactive design, which has prompted 100,000 downloads of its mobile application<sup>15</sup>.

## 2.4 Serbian outlets with a strong Russia focus

Outside of the official Russian media channels, Russian influence has been channelled through some of the most popular outlets in the country. Among them are the dailies *Informer* and *Srpski Telegraph*, and the weekly *Pečat*. The latter's general manager is Milorad Vučelić, one of the closest friends of Slobodan Milošević, and its former editor-in-chief was Aleksandar Vulin, the Minister of Defence in the government of Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. These newspapers have expanded their coverage of Russian domestic and foreign politics, have glorified Russian presence in the Western Balkans, and have heavily advocated for the expansion of economic and military ties between Russia and Serbia. In addition, the pro-Russian Pink TV and radio network, owned by Jelko Mitrović, who was close to Milošević and currently supports Alexander Vučić, have terrestrial stations in Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro and reach out through satellite broadcasts to Macedonia, Croatia and other countries. Pink TV often attacks civil society and

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remains significant to this date. In October 2009, the state-owned gas supplier, Srbijagas, which is also fully dependent on Russian gas imports, bought 30% of the shares of Informatika for EUR 2.2 million.

<sup>15</sup> According to a 2016 promotional video by Sputnik; Šajkaš. (2016)



independent media organisations<sup>16</sup>, while boosting the image of Vladimir Putin and the Russian support for Serbia.

Russia's influence reaches as far as the sphere of social media. Young people in Serbia rank lowest amongst readers of printed press and yet, they represent a prime target for propaganda. Russian state-owned media including RT and *Sputnik* tried to capture the attention of young people in an attempt to dissuade their overwhelming support for a pro-Western orientation of Serbia. Pushing through a positive message to older generations about Russia's role in Serbia as a protector of its interests has been much easier considering the deep historical roots that Russia has in Serbia's common consciousness.

A good indicator to assess the impact of traditional media on young people is to assess their reach on social media. In that regard, Russian media outlets have been very effective in using new communication channels. When compared to other news outlets in Serbia, RT is the 15th most popular page on Facebook with 163,000 followers and *Sputnik* is 24th with 101,000 likes. A number of somewhat pro-Russian media, such as *Nedeljnik*<sup>17</sup>, *Kosmopol*, *Intermagazin* or *Srbinfo*, while showing more modest statistics, still reach between 25,000 and 80,000 likes on Facebook. Also, *Sputnik* has been regularly listed among the five fastest-growing Facebook pages in Serbia<sup>18</sup>. The lay-out of social media has often been criticised for highlighting headlines over sources, which makes differentiation between fake news and news, reliable journalism and propaganda an effort that many do not want to bother with. Pro-Russian media's popularity on Facebook is rendered more worrying in the light of the confusing space social media takes as a source of information.

## 2.5 Russian disinformation narratives and impact

What defines the main trajectory of the Russian disinformation strategy in Serbia is the fostering of nationalistic sentiments and the re-awakening of interethnic rivalry, in which Russia positions itself as the guardian of Serbian interests vis-à-vis Kosovo and of Serbian minorities in neighbouring countries including Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Popular media outlets including tabloids (*Blic*, *Kurir* and others<sup>19</sup>) have engaged in the

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<sup>16</sup> BalkanInsight, available at: <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/smear-campaign-against-media-in-serbia-revs-up-11-10-2015> [21 August 2018].

<sup>17</sup> *Nedeljnik* also republishes The New York Times and *Le Monde Diplomatique* in the same way as they do *Ruska reč*, as an addition to the weekly magazine.

<sup>18</sup> Socialbakers.com (2018). Facebook stats in Serbia.

<sup>19</sup> Blic.rs, Putin not using an umbrella, 22.07.2017, available at: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/svet/video-putin-sta-ce-mi-kisobran-nisam-od-secera/qgvnktj> [2 May 2018].

promotion of sympathy and admiration for Russia, presenting it as the big brother of all Slavic countries (Šajkaš 2016). They indulge in the promotion of president Putin's personal traits, the alleged superiority of the Russian army and the indispensable role that Russia has and is still playing for the survival of Serbia. The portrayal of Putin as a supreme leader with almost "superhuman" qualities furthers the impression that Russia is Putin, and Putin is Russia.

Zooming in on the disinformation strategy exploited by pro-Russian media channels in Serbia<sup>20</sup>, one can identify three main narratives:

Firstly, pro-Russian media in Serbia have been promoting the Russian viewpoint on international affairs including the interpretation of the Ukrainian conflict as the attack of a "fascist regime" on peaceful residents in Eastern Ukraine, who have tried to defend their rights. The 2013/14 revolution in Ukraine is regularly presented in Serbian media as a coup directly organised by the U.S. (*Sputnik* 2017). In addition, pro-Russian media outlets have allowed journalists and political commentators to increase the popular narrative in Russian media that the foreign policy of the West towards the Middle East and Eastern Europe has not been driven by the goal of promoting democratic values but by egotistic geostrategic interests, most importantly containing Russia. There is also a powerful attempt to create an image of shared struggle between Russian and Serbian people, with what might seem an absurd analogy between Crimea and Kosovo: war in Ukraine would be similar to the NATO bombing of Milošević's Serbia; a Western attempt to violently submit foreign countries to its influence by instigating protests that topple governments which do not follow a strategy consistent with the U.S. and EU's interests.

Secondly, Russia-influenced media in Serbia aims to discredit Euro-Atlantic institutions as encroaching on Serbia's independence and sovereignty. One notable example has been the spread of false claims that the EU has been supporting alleged "separatist" groups in the northern region of Vojvodina (*Vesti.rs* 2015). The EU and NATO are often depicted as trying to force Kosovo's independence on Serbia by using this issue as the main prerequisite for Serbia's joining of the West.<sup>21</sup> The benefits of joining the EU are constantly undermined in pro-Russian media in Serbia on the grounds that, on the one hand, EU accession would just help European businesses exploit Western Balkan markets,

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<sup>20</sup> We analysed around 100 articles in some of the newspapers and online portals with strong pro-Russian narratives that have been recognised as close to Russia. We also studied existing research in some of the main narratives exploited by Russia in the media sector of the region.

<sup>21</sup> For examples of articles, see bibliography.

and on the other, that the EU has not brought the economic prosperity it promises, citing Romania and Bulgaria as examples. Meanwhile, the fear of an imaginary Islamic or Albanian agenda is fostered by alarmist news articles on events in the Serb-dominated Northern Kosovo, Macedonia or Bosnia's *Republika Srpska*. The exaggeration of small-scale tensions aims to keep the focus of the general population on nationalist grievances, which prevents wounds from healing (*Srbinfo* 2017). The danger of this narrative is that it induces a change in the public debate that throws back to Milošević years: in today's Serbia the merits of democratisation and its very validity are questioned by many (Brunwasser 2017).

Thirdly, pro-Russian media outlets trump up the extent and solidity of Russian-Serbian ties not only emphasising a common history such as their shared struggle during the two world wars in the 20th century and the struggle against the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, but also the economic benefit Russian investment has brought to Serbia over the last decades. Gazprom has been regularly presented as a powerful instrument to transform Serbia into a major energy power in the region through the promotion of a large-scale natural-gas pipeline such as South Stream before 2014 and Tesla since then. The most recent reincarnation of the pipeline project, the so-called Serbian Stream, puts Serbia in the light of a potential future hub of natural gas in the South East European region. As the largest company in Serbia and the biggest taxpayer, Gazprom (owner of NIS) is regularly presented as a key supporter of the budget and one of the most important employers in the country. Similarly, Russia-influenced media devote a significant share of their economic coverage on the Russian infrastructure loans for developing Serbia's railway network, on the expansion of Russian-Serbian defense cooperation (Russia donating jet fighters, helicopters and tanks), and on the critical role Russian aid has played in responding to natural disasters. Pro-Russian Serbian media often spreads popular myths about the supremacy of Russian arms (mostly created during the NATO bombing campaign in 1999). The image created builds upon a strong public perception that Russian arms are one of the main conditions for the successful defence of the country. The Serbian government uses this perception to generate even more popularity by very vocally expressing its adherence to the expansion in military ties.

In fact, there is only very limited objectively verifiable information about the military cooperation between the two countries. Domestic media has focused on painting the Russian donation of six second-hand MiG 29s and a small-scale model of an anti-aircraft S-300 missile as a great success. S-300 missiles have played a somewhat symbolic role in the Serbian consciousness as they have represented the resistance against NATO during

the 1999 bombing campaign (*Sputnik Srbija* 2016). Yet information about the terms and the actual quality of the Russian arms delivery has not been specified. Politicians have used this as a great opportunity for PR, which has in turn ultimately boosted the positive image of Russia among Serbs.

### **Box 1: Strategic communication as part of Russia's soft power strategy**

The importance of the pro-Russian media outlets in Serbia is not a mere consequence of Russian popularity but the result of Moscow's coordinated soft power strategy whose scope embraces all areas of public life. A 2016 report on Russian soft power in Serbia identified more than 110 pro-Russian organisations, which are either directly funded by the Kremlin or are influenced by pro-Russian narratives (Center for Euro-Atlantic Studies 2016). Media outlets, as numerous and influential as they may be, are only part of a wider Russian soft power structure. Political movements or parties, religious and student associations contribute to promoting Serbian nationalism that embodies a powerful anti-NATO and anti-EU sentiment.<sup>22</sup>

Russia has been trying to strengthen the perception of a strong Russian-Serbian cultural bond rooted in Orthodox Christianity and 19th century history of Russian support for the Serbian independence. The Kremlin, through the state-owned *Gazpromneft* (which owns the largest Serbian oil and gas company, *Naftna Industrija Srbije* (NIS)) has financed religious initiatives such as the 2017 installation of a costly mosaic in the heart of Saint Sava's church in Belgrade that has received much attention from the media, intensified by the presence of the Russian foreign minister, Sergey Lavrov, at the inauguration.<sup>23</sup> *Gazprom* is also the main sponsor of the *Crvena Zvezda* football club, which has a huge fan base in the country. In addition, a special fund was created to restore the Russian cemetery in Belgrade, which was inaugurated during a lavish ceremony in 2012 led by the Russian Patriarch Kirill.

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<sup>22</sup> Bosko Jaksic for RadioFreeEurope, Radio Liberty, Putin's orchestra in Belgrade, Belgrade, September 18th, 2017; Kurir, 22/02/18, available at: <https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/2999945/kurir-tv-uzivo-iz-hrama-svetog-save-vucic-i-lavrov-pred-velelepnim-mozaiikom-centralne-kupole-srpske-svetinje-na-vcacaru> [30 April 2018].

<sup>23</sup> Speech of Aleksandar Vucic insists on the "Brotherhood of the Serbs and the Russians that resisted all storms", and highlighted the dome's mosaic on Saint-Sava as the best place to evoke that Serbs and Russians "are from the same people, share culture, dreams and faith".

Branch offices of the organisation *Russkij Mir* (the Russian World) and a representative office of the International Fund for the Unity of Orthodox Nations have been active in Novi Sad and Belgrade since 2005. In 2013, the same year that the Council of the European Union announced Serbia's readiness to start negotiation talks with the EU, Russia opened a representative office of the foreign-intelligence linked Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (RISI-RISS) in Belgrade. Several Russian foundations have included Serbia in their programmes and grant schemes, including the Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund, the Strategic Culture Foundation, the Centre of National Glory and the Foundation of St. Andrew.

Russia also supports the actions of the domestic far right and Eurosceptic organisations such as Dveri in Serbia. Meanwhile, there are a number of political parties that openly propagate closer ties with Russia including the junior coalition partner in the current government, the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS), the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS) and the far-right *Treća Srbija* (Third Serbia). Russia has also backed a government, which includes openly pro-Russian figures such as Ivica Dačić (deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister), Nenad Popović (a Serbian businessman with extensive presence on the Russian market, who is also a Minister without portfolio of Serbia in charge of innovation and technological development) and Aleksandar Vulin (a vocal nationalist and current Minister of Defense).

The biggest impact of Russian enhanced soft power influence in Serbia has been to gradually unite the voices of different seemingly autonomous pro-Russian players in the country. A unifying tool has been the Russian influence on the Serbian media sector.

The repetitive glorification of energy, defence and railway cooperation between Serbia and Russia has overshadowed the coverage of the contribution of the EU and other multi-lateral funding agencies to the country and the region. This is reflected in public perceptions. According to a poll conducted by the Serbian EU integration office, 25% of Serbs consider Russia as the biggest donor to the country despite the fact that EU countries have invested around 10-15 times more than Russia.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> European Western Balkans (2017): 47% of Citizens support Serbian Membership to the EU, 6 February, 2017, available at: <https://europeanwesternbalkans.com/2017/02/06/47-of-citizens-support-serbian-membership-to-the-eu/> [23 July 2018], Data is based on a survey, titled "European Orientation of Serbian Citizens", conducted by the Serbian European Integration Office.

Not surprisingly, a 2017 survey showed that 61% of Serbs think that Russia has a good influence on Serbian foreign policy (Belgrade Centre for Security Policy 2017). Meanwhile, only 28% and 9% consider the EU and the US, respectively, as a force for good in impacting the country's foreign policy. Some 32% would support Serbia joining the Eurasian Union in a referendum, which is more than the 22% who would reject such a move. Serbs overwhelmingly reject joining NATO and would not agree to EU accession if the recognition of Kosovo's independence is the price to pay.

### 3. Conclusions for German and EU policy-makers

To sum up, the direct Russian influence on Serbia's media market is limited, since none of the major media systems is directly in Russian ownership. However, the indirect Russian influence on the Serbian media sector has been growing since 2012 and the ascendancy of Aleksander Vucic's SNS to power. The Russian disinformation campaign has been amplified through several key channels:

- the work of the news agency *Sputnik* (and its informal network of radio stations and social media outlets);
- pro-Russian oriented web portals, many of which have not been officially registered as media outlets;
- the tabloidisation of Serbian media; both newspapers and TV stations as cash-strapped outlets use translated freely-distributed Russian content to fill up space.

The latter is probably the most effective instrument for the spread of Russian propaganda in Serbia. The Serbian government seems to have purposefully strengthened the pro-Russian narratives in tabloids such as *Informer*, *Srpski telegraf* and *Večernje novosti*, which allows the key bearer of political connections to Russia, President Vučić, to gain further credence in the eyes of pro-Russian readers.

The impact of the disinformation campaign has been the steady growth of Russia's standing in Serbian society. However, what has allowed this strategy to thrive in Serbia is the Serbian internal political context. The "wind of change" brought by the democracy protests in 2000 that led to the end of the rule of Slobodan Milošević has come to a standstill. The Serbian political system has deteriorated into a "stabilitocracy"<sup>25</sup>, which is epitomised by the degradation of media freedom and decline of the social commitment to

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<sup>25</sup> Srđa Pavlović, Montenegro's 'stabilitocracy': The West's support of Đukanović is damaging the prospects of democratic change, 2016, LSE Blog European Politics and Policy. For more on stabilitocracy, see bibliography.

democratic principles. Media outlets criticising the government have been labelled as foreign-backed propagandists, while investigative journalists have been regularly harassed by government officials and in the pro-government media (Freedom House 2017). The latter have also regularly attacked independent journalists accusing them of espionage and of trying to destabilise the country (Transparency International Serbia 2018). Many of these conspiracy theories about independent media outlets have been directly borrowed from the Russian propaganda playbook broadcast on Russian official state-owned outlets such as RT, *Sputnik* and *Pervii Kanal*. Ultimately, mainstream media channels dominating information distribution in Serbia have uncritically interjected in their news streams propaganda pieces admiring the government and exaggerating the closeness between the Russian and Serbian governments. This has amounted to a Russia-influenced media capture that has reinforced non-democratic tendencies.

To counter the malign Russian influence in Serbia and close the associated governance deficits, the EU has put forward the incentive of membership as a driver of reform processes. The Serbian government has been supporting an EU path of development but without abandoning its close ties with Russia. In 2017, the US former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Hoyt Yee, explicitly stated that Serbia “cannot sit on two chairs” in its foreign policy (Vuk 2017). Apart from the clear messages by Western policy-makers, the EU has been the biggest donor to Serbia with EUR 2.6 billion (as of 2014) in investment grants under the IPA programme.<sup>26</sup> The EU has also helped develop local civil society and media channels although much of the funding has been absorbed through organisations close to the government (The Delegation of the EU to the Republic of Serbia 2018). Since 2000, the EU has supported Serbian media with a total of EUR 33 million focusing on capacity-building of journalists, media literacy and investigative journalism. Serbian government officials have, meanwhile, harshly criticised EU funding for independent media in the country claiming that the EU’s goal could be to create chaos in the country. Germany has also been a big donor to the country with the German Federal Government contributing more than EUR 1.8 billion in funding since 2000 for projects in technical and financial cooperation, sustainable economic development, environmental infrastructure projects and public administration reform. By 2017, Germany had invested a total of over EUR 2.2 billion creating 45,000 jobs in different high-value-added manufacturing industries, making it one of the country’s single largest investors.

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<sup>26</sup> Statistics from the Delegation of the European Union in Serbia, available at: <https://europa.rs/eu-assistance-to-serbia/?lang=en> [21 August 2018].

Despite these numbers, an Ipsos survey from 2015 showed that 63% of Serbs claimed that Serbia's interests are best served by maintaining strong relations with Russia, while the percentage for Germany and the EU was 9% and 12% respectively. Also, 36% of Serbs argue that Russia is the country's biggest donor versus 21%, who would point to the EU, and only 8% - Germany. A similar 2018 survey by the same polling company shows that 80% of Serbs (the largest share from all countries surveyed) think that Russia's influence on world affairs will increase in the future. An opinion poll from 2017 conducted by the Belgrade Center for Security Policy revealed that between a fifth and a quarter of respondents think that EU membership would have a negative impact on the economic and the country's political stability. Just a third of Serbian citizens think that Germany has good or mostly good influence on Serbia's foreign policy, while the share for the EU is even lower. Also, 50% of Serbs would be indifferent to an EU collapse and 15% would be even cheering. Another 69% say they would not support EU accession if this means recognition of Kosovo's independence.

The truth of the matter is that both the EU and Germany have found it difficult to advertise their economic presence in Serbia, while their political efforts to drive forward reform and reconciliation have been a soft target for Russian propaganda creating a speculative image of an EU plot to take away Serbia's sovereignty. Unlike Russia's publicly touted unconditional support, the EU and its members have put forward openly and have communicated very clear conditions for EU membership, such as the primacy of the rule of law and human rights, which have also been targeted by Russian disinformation very often.



### III. Communication strategy of Russia: a case study of Estonia by Juulia Barthel

#### 1. Introduction

Although Russia does not pose a direct military threat to Estonia today, the relationship between the two countries alternates between overtures and tensions. Russia's historical claim on Estonia being part of the Russian sphere of influence is based on Estonia having belonged to the Russian and Soviet Empire for centuries. This claim encounters massive resistance from most parts of the Estonian society. Contradicting interpretations of the common history in the 20th century, systematic instrumentalisation of the Russian minority in Estonia and fake news attacks pose fundamental challenges to the relationship between the two neighbours.

Russia today makes use of a varied set of soft power instruments to maintain its influence in the Baltic States. It aims, still, to impact on the Estonian process of European integration by destabilising the country and discrediting local authorities. However, with its attempts of destabilising a single country like Estonia, Russia tries to reveal the weaknesses of the whole EU fuelling tensions among the member states. With its military provocations at the Estonian-Russian border, such as violations of the Estonian air-space or the incident with Eston Kohver<sup>27</sup> – convicted of espionage by the Russian state and sentenced to 15 years in prison<sup>28</sup> – Russia not only creates tensions in bilateral relations between Estonia and Russia, but tests the EU's and NATO's reactions. At the same time, negative coverage of European and Estonian affairs in Russian media distracts and misleads the Russian domestic population away from the successes of a Baltic state in its transformation process. The Russian leadership has no interest in Russian society being aware of a successful democratic transformation of a post-Soviet country. Therefore, it is important for Russia to influence Estonia on a bilateral level. By creating an alternative narrative in local Russian media and Russian language media abroad the Russian leadership aims to undermine the democratic state in Estonia (and in Europe as a whole) as well as the credibility of the media, relying on the principle that Russian-British journalist Peter Pomerantsev (2014), called in his book "nothing is true, and everything is possible". This strategy of exposure of European weaknesses legitimises the Russian authoritarian regime at home while opposing the liberal democratic order of Europe.

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<sup>27</sup> Eston Kohver is an Estonian officer of the Internal Security Service, who was abducted on 5 September 2014 at gunpoint from the Estonian side of the border according to the official statement of the Estonian government. Russia, however, claims that Kohver was spying on the Russian side of the border.

<sup>28</sup> Kohver was released a month later as a result of an agent exchange between Russia and Estonia.

This case study will give an overview of the key narratives Russia has created in Estonia influencing the public discourse, describe communication instruments of influence, which Russia uses to strengthen its positions in the neighbouring countries, and evaluate the success of both Russian and European communication strategies towards Estonia. Expert interviews were conducted under Chatham House Rule on the request of interviewees and are therefore not quoted by name in this study.

## 2. Narratives and their aims

The negative portrayal of Estonia in Russia was intensified particularly after the country joined the EU and NATO in 2004. Over the last fifteen years Russia has developed three main narratives about Estonia: i) Estonia as a fascist country; ii) Estonian Russian's as part of a divided nation and iii) Russia's claim to protect the rights of Russian-speaking minorities outside of Russia.

Concerning the first narrative, Russia is playing the historical card, denying the fact that Estonia was once an occupied country and labelling the country with fascist slogans. In Estonia, the narrative targets the local Russian-speaking minority, whose identity was built on the victory over fascism in World War II during the Soviet period. In its annual report of 2007 the Estonian Security Police stated that between 2005 and 2007 an increasing number of pro-Russian events had taken place in Estonia. These events focused on the victory over fascism in World War II (Kapo Annual Report 2007). Partially initiated and supported by the Russian embassy in Tallinn and partially organised by local Russian-speaking activists – among others well-known names in Estonia: Andrey Zarenkov, Maksim Reva, Dmitry Linter and Dmitry Klenski – they aimed at preventing an increase of anti-Russian movements after Estonia became a member of the EU.

The perception of a growing anti-Russian movement in Estonia was aggregated by the fact that between 2005 and 2007 several acts of vandalism were directed at the *Soviet Monument to the Liberators of Tallinn* (publicly called "Bronze Soldier"). Both in 2005 and 2006 the monument was defiled by unknown persons with Nazi symbols. Presumably, right-wing Estonian radicals were involved. A movement called *Nochnoj Dozor* (Night watchmen) initiated by local activists Dmitry Klenski and Dmitri Linter and a member of the Kremlin-organised youth organisation *Nashi*, Mark Sirök, took an active role in protecting the monument. The situation escalated in 2007, when mass riots took place in Tallinn, after the government of former Prime Minister Andrus Ansip decided to move the monument from the city centre to Estonia's main military cemetery on the outskirts of Tallinn.

Since then several Russian media outlets have been creating the narrative of Estonia as a fascist country, which supports Nazi ideology and perceives Russia as an occupant and not as a liberator. Media in Russia hereby refer to a yearly gathering of veterans of the Estonian SS legion in Sinimäe and send the message that the Estonian government supports the development of fascist movements in the country.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, the fact that Estonia, due to Russian occupation, lost its independency during World War II is not reflected in this narrative as well as the fact that these SS legion veteran gatherings hardly have an impact on society. Although SS veteran gatherings still take place and they are not legally forbidden in Estonia, the movement itself hardly represents a security risk for the country or in any way indicates the development of Estonia as a fascist country.

For Russians living in Russia the narrative of Estonia as a fascist country additionally serves as an example of how a democratic path after the collapse of the Soviet Union can be harmful for people and societies. Compared to a fascist Estonia, the current Russian leadership stands for stability and security for its citizens, a narrative which is particularly important in times of an ongoing economic crisis in Russia. Therefore, even ten years after the “Bronze Nights” in Tallinn, as the mass riots are called, Estonia remains connected to fascism in Russian media – a narrative which is often used by Russian official media to discredit other countries. This was also done in the case of Ukraine after the Euro-Maidan protests in 2013/14.

The second narrative is that of a divided nation. This narrative is meant to influence Russians living in Estonia as the main target group. The Russian minority in Estonia makes up a quarter (25% or 330,206 people<sup>30</sup>) of the Estonian population (Statistics Estonia 2017). After Vladimir Putin was elected as president for the first time in 2000, the Russian leadership developed the narrative of Russians being a divided nation since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russians living abroad were redefined as “compatriots” and thus became a strategic priority. The term “compatriots” was defined very broadly and included not only Russian citizens but also “ethnic” Russians, who had obtained a different citizenship after the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as those whose mother tongue was Russian but they would come from countries like Belarus, Ukraine, partially Poland and other areas of the former Soviet space. Later the term “Russian world” was introduced, which includes all people who speak, feel and think Russian.

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<sup>29</sup> Russian media outlet “inosmi” web-page, available at:  
<https://inosmi.ru/video/20110802/172789815.html> [31 July 2018].

<sup>30</sup> Population according to ethnicity.

This narrative had a particular meaning for the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia, during and after the mass riots in Tallinn of April 2007. The relocation of the monument to the cemetery, which became a symbol of inciting a conflict on the different interpretation of history among Estonians and Russian-speakers, dramatically split society, strengthening the Russian narrative of Estonia as a fascist country in the eyes of both Russians in Russia and Russian-speakers in Estonia. Moreover, it made Russian-speakers in Estonia feel abandoned by the country that most of them considered as their home-country. For Russia, it opened a window of opportunity to establish Russia-friendly organisations and networks, promoting the concept of a “Russian World” (*Russkij Mir*), an idea based on the value of historical and cultural belonging of Russians all over the world to the Russian state, uniting them and building a new Russian identity (Krivopuslov 2016).

The sense of a divided nation was additionally supported by the third narrative of the Russian state with the need to protect its compatriots abroad. During the mass riots in Tallinn 2007, the compatriot policy had little to offer to Russian-speakers in Estonia. This changed when the Russian government learned from this experience and in 2008 declared the protection of compatriots abroad as a new priority in their foreign policy. Discrimination and suppression of the rights, freedoms and interests of citizens of the Russian Federation in neighbouring states were suddenly among the three main threats to Russia’s security policy (Kallas 2016). Even though, in Estonia, Russian citizens make up only about 7% of the population, this change in Russian foreign policy is important for all post-Soviet countries. Later in 2008, Russia claimed to protect the rights of its citizens in South-Ossetia and Abkhazia, which resulted in a five-day war with Georgia and a creeping integration of these two territories into the Russian Federation.

According to Russian leadership, the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia experiences pro-active discrimination by the titular nation and therefore needs to be protected by Russia (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Russia 2004). The apple of discord is the citizenship policy of Estonia, which, according to the principle of descent, applies only to people that have Estonian ancestors. The Integration Monitoring of 2015 shows that in Estonia about 85% of the population have Estonian citizenship, 7% are non-citizens, and 7% are citizens of the Russian Federation (Estonian Integration Monitoring 2015). In comparison, at the beginning of the 1990s, the number of non-citizens was 32% (Estonian Integration Monitoring 2017). Many Russians living in Estonia did not automatically receive Estonian citizenship in 1991 and needed to apply for it. Those who did not apply either took on Russian citizenship or stayed as non-citizens (in Estonia they are called “grey passport holders”). That is how the term “non-citizen” or “alien” emerged in Estonia and Latvia.

This means that the holders of such grey passports do not have any citizenship and therefore cannot vote in parliamentary elections neither in Estonia nor in any other country. However, they obtained long-term residency in the country and can vote in communal elections. In terms of employment, restrictions apply only to particular positions (e.g. security service or diplomatic service), which require Estonian citizenship. This restriction is, however, applicable to all foreign citizens in Estonia regardless of their citizenship. Since Estonia became a part of the EU in 2004, all residents of Estonia, no matter what citizenship, have the mobility rights of the EU in terms of labour, visa-free travelling within the Schengen Zone and participation in European Parliament elections. The Estonian citizenship and “non-citizen” policy was interpreted as an offensive act against Russians living in Estonia. Russian media and officials keep heating up this narrative, referring to discrimination, even though it is a domestic issue of an independent country.

Whereas the older generation of the Russian-speaking minority can indeed be emotionally targeted by this citizenship policy, the younger generations (born after 1991) are, to a vast majority, Estonian citizens. Most of them, however, attend a school where Russian is the main teaching language. Although the content of learning materials is the same for both Russian- and Estonian-speaking schools, Russian-speaking schools have a set of structural problems starting from poor Estonian language skills to an aging pedagogical staff. Thus these schools are less successful in providing scholars with modern teaching methods. Pupils are less successful at high-school exams when compared with Estonian schools and high-school graduates are less successful at entering universities and at achieving university degrees. The main obstacle in this regard is a limited knowledge of the Estonian language. To make Russian-speaking schools more competitive a language reform was passed in 2007.<sup>31</sup> In the Russian Federation this language reform was interpreted as another act of discrimination by the Estonian state. This has further deepened the narrative that Russia needs to protect minority rights. Russian media argued that with the language reform<sup>32</sup> the Estonian government had broken constitutional law. However, Russian media coverage never refers to the fact that this language reform applies only to non-compulsory high-school education and does not apply to obligatory secondary education (1<sup>st</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> grade), which is indeed under the protection of constitutional law.

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<sup>31</sup> This language reform foresees the teaching of 60% of classes in Estonian or other foreign languages in high-school (*Gymnasium*) in order to provide students with better language skills and prepare them for studies at Estonian universities in the Estonian language.

<sup>32</sup> “*Вся правда о русских и русских школах в Эстонии*” (The whole Truth about Russians and Russian Schools in Estonia), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYp3oEH3xHI> [31 July 2018].

The narrative of fascist Estonia and the discrimination of the Russian-speaking population in EU countries help the Russian leadership fulfil two primary goals. First, it helps to legitimise the Russian government's foreign policy domestically. Second, it confuses and splits European societies. This improves Russia's bargaining position towards the EU in other areas like the EU's sanctions policy in the Ukrainian conflict.

In Estonia, the Ukrainian conflict of 2014 and the following Russian annexation of Crimea and war in Eastern Ukraine disclosed not only a discussion about the security of the country, but also divided Estonian society. According to opinion polls, conducted by the Estonian Ministry of Defence at the end of 2016, 92% of Estonians support NATO membership of the country. Among the Russian-speaking population, membership status was supported by only 33%. On the contrary, 53% of Russian speakers believe that a good relationship with Russia is a better guarantee for Estonian security. This opinion is shared by only 18 % of ethnic Estonians (Nielsen/Paabo 2015). In its vast majority, the Russian minority in Estonia supports Russian foreign policy and sees Russia as a mediator in a world dominated by the United States. Therefore, the narrative of Great Russia has an impact on European countries and the Russian minority living there as we see more and more right- and left-wing parties in Europe seeking alternative policies and partially sharing the Russian government's view of the current world order increasingly supported by these Russian minorities.

### **3. Shifting communication strategy**

Today the political context has changed. Although the narratives described above remain, Estonia is no longer a target of influence on its own (as it was until its NATO and EU membership). Since NATO guarantees the security of the Baltic states by collective defence and the socio-economic integration of Estonia into the EU has been achieved successfully (especially after the introduction of the Euro shortly after the financial crisis of 2009/10) the destabilisation of one single country makes little sense. Russia has shifted its communication strategy from individual EU countries to the whole Union because the EU is becoming an influential player in the common neighbourhood. Russia has not created and does not create new anti-EU narratives, it uses existing weaknesses and fuels discrimination against minorities which are popular in many post-Soviet countries. Anti-EU narratives in Estonia are about refugees, sexual minorities referred to as "Gayropa", demoralisation of the EU liberal order etc., which are applicable to the whole EU. And since the EU member states often have different approaches towards the same challenge and speak with different "voices" within the EU, it is attractive for the Russian leadership that a possible political destabilisation of one country could potentially impact other EU and

NATO member states. However, for Russian audiences inside and outside of Russia, Russia focuses on individual countries and specific stories to create a systematic negative coverage about the EU. It adapts its communication strategy to the conditions of the target countries with a significant Russian audience.

Media coverage stories, similar to the German “Lisa case” are no exception in the Estonian context. Russian media and other private and state actors falsify facts and create frustration among the population of other countries, which is supposed to lead to mistrust of all media while undermining the credibility of the ruling government. Additionally, online and social media allow fakes today to be spread with an incredible speed and reach out to a broad audience, with no time for fact-checking. Early in 2016 it was the “Lisa case” in Berlin, which created a wave of protest among the Russian-speaking population of Germany (Meister 2016). Early in 2017 a similar story of sexual abuse of a local girl in Lithuania by NATO soldiers made the headlines.<sup>33</sup> In July 2017 a Russian girl, Isabella, was taken away from her family (who were Russian citizens) in Tallinn, Estonia. Several Russian media outlets reported that the child was taken away because the family wanted to move from Estonia to Russia and claimed Estonia was a Russophobic country.<sup>34</sup> Both the Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs as well as the Youth Welfare Office admitted that the girl was taken to an orphanage due to anti-sanitary conditions at home.

In Estonia, where the main channel of media influence is TV, television channels in Russian present one-sided, Russia-friendly and EU-critical news coverage and provide a media platform for pro-Russian experts only. In neighbouring Finland, for example, Russian communication strategy takes place mostly on the internet and, in particular, social media (Jantunen 2018), where it uses already existing facts and mixes them with fake stories.

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<sup>33</sup> NATO suspects Russia behind fake news campaign against *Bundeswehr*, Spiegel Online, 2017, <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/bundeswehr-fake-news-attacke-gegen-deutsche-soldaten-in-litauen-a-1134925.html> [31 July 2018].

<sup>34</sup> “В Эстонии у русской семьи отобрали дочь из-за их желания вернуться в Россию” (A daughter was taken away from a Russian family in Estonia, because the family intended to move to Russia), available at: [https://politikus.ru/events/96856-v-estonii-u-russkoy-semi-otobrali-doch-iz-za-ih-zhelaniya-vernutsya-v-rossiyu.html](https://politikus.ru/events/96856-v-estonii-u-russkoy-semi-otobrali-doch-iz-za-ih-zhelaniya-vernut'sya-v-rossiyu.html) [31 July 2018].

#### 4. Media and communication instruments of Russian influence in Estonia

Russia has continuously expanded its areas of influence in Estonia. It has been creating networks and institutions abroad. Moreover, it has been concentrating on building up an alternative media offer, covering Russia and Russian affairs from a Russia-friendly perspective and questioning and undermining the established media.

##### Box 2: Building institutions

The *Russkij Mir* Foundation began its work in Estonia on 21 June 2007, only two months after the mass riots in Tallinn, in April 2007. The foundation mainly promotes projects of cultural and linguistic exchange and sees itself in a similar position to the German Goethe-Institut. One of the main priorities of the Foundation is to “promote and disseminate objective information about modern Russia, Russian compatriots and, on that basis, a positive image of the Russian Federation” as well as the “support of Russian-speaking and Russian media and information sources”<sup>35</sup>. The foundation supports local initiatives in Estonia, creates networks, and invites experts to Estonia who have a positive attitude towards Putin and the current Russian regime. What makes the *Russkij Mir* Foundation different to the German Goethe-Institut is the fact that while the Goethe-Institut promotes the German language as well as international cooperation and understanding (*Völkerverständigung*) *Russkij Mir*, the “Russian world”<sup>36</sup> promotes the country as the only fatherland for people living abroad without including other identities and other cultures.

*Rossotrudnichestvo* – The annual report of the Estonian Security Police of 2017 devotes special attention to a growing number of programmes aiming to reach a young generation of Europeans. Among others, participants from Estonia took part in some of the events organised in Russia in the summer of 2017. This is a new generation to which Russia is paying more and more attention by using its soft power instruments to influence the opinion of young Europeans.

<sup>35</sup> *Russkij Mir* Foundation, <https://russkiymir.ru/fund/> [31 July 2018].

<sup>36</sup> *Russkij Mir* Foundation, Quote: “Русский мир — это мир России. Призвание каждого человека — помочь своему отечеству, заботиться о ближнем” (The Russian world is the world of Russia. The mission of each person is to help one's fatherland, take care of each other).



**Impressum Club Tallinn**<sup>37</sup> – was founded as an initiative of journalists of the newspaper “Komsomolskaya Pravda in Northern Europe”.<sup>38</sup> According to the official statement the main task of the association is to support civil and public initiatives related to the use of the potential of modern media. The club’s activities are aimed at expanding international information exchange on the basis of common European traditions and civil law norms, training journalists, conducting research, educational endeavours, publishing and other civil activities in the media sphere.<sup>39</sup> Impressum Club organises events related to Russia, inviting speakers from Russia and spreading the idea of the “Russian world”.

*Vene Kool Eestis*<sup>40</sup> (the Russian School of Estonia), was founded in 2004. However, after the 2007 language reform was introduced in schools with Russian language education, the organisation increased its outreach among the Russian-speaking minority. The purpose of the organisation is to support and develop the Russian School of Estonia – which includes pre-school, primary school and higher education institutions – in order to create the most favourable and effective learning environment for children. The organisation is against education in Estonian in Russian-speaking schools and acts to preserve Russian-language education in Estonia.

### **Influence on Estonian media landscape**

For more than a decade Estonian media and Russian language media existed parallel to each other. The general low quality of journalism for national minorities and poor offer of programmes (both educational and entertainment) in Russian let the Russian-speaking population<sup>41</sup> focus on Russian channels. Similar to other countries of the former Soviet Union, in Estonia, TV makes up the main source of information for both Estonians and Russians. However, both groups consume different TV channels. According to the recent Estonian integration monitoring report (2017) Estonian Television (ETV) is considered to be the most important source of information for 84% of ethnic Estonians but only for 27% of Russian-speakers (see chart 1).

<sup>37</sup> Impressum Club, <http://www.impressum-club.eu/index.php?page=mission> [31 July 2018].

<sup>38</sup> A small local newspaper, financed by the NGO Baltnipress, which received financial support from Russian official institutions, according to the Estonian security police’s annual report of 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Impressum Club, <http://www.impressum-club.eu/index.php?page=history> [31 July 2018].

<sup>40</sup> Vene kool Eestis, [www.venekool.eu/](http://www.venekool.eu/) [31 July 2018].

<sup>41</sup> The Estonian Integration Monitoring distinguishes between ethnic Estonians and Russian-speaking population.

A new Russian-language channel ETV+, which was introduced in 2015, is considered an important source of information for 43% of the Russian-speaking population in Estonia. For 71% of Russian-speakers PBK (*Первый Балтийский Канал/First Baltic Channel*) remains the most important source of information (Estonian Integration Monitoring 2017). Although it is officially registered in Riga, Latvia, most of PBK's content comes from Russia. Officially, the channel is part of the Baltic Media Alliance (BMA), an international media group, operating in three Baltic countries. BMA is the Baltic's market leader in terms of media outlets, specifically targeting national minorities. According to their own statement, BMA provides the audience with programmes and motion pictures from leading Russian and Western producers.<sup>42</sup> Although the channel claims to be independent, there is a strong similarity to the First Russian Channel. The main difference between the First Russian Channel and First Baltic Channel is the news section. Russian news are replaced by the local Estonian/Latvian news and tend to favour a more Russian-friendly news coverage. PBK's news section is considered to be important for 70% of the Russian-speaking population. In comparison, the Estonian news section *Aktuaalne Kaamera*, broadcast in Russian on the newly introduced ETV+ is important for 63% of Russian-speakers.

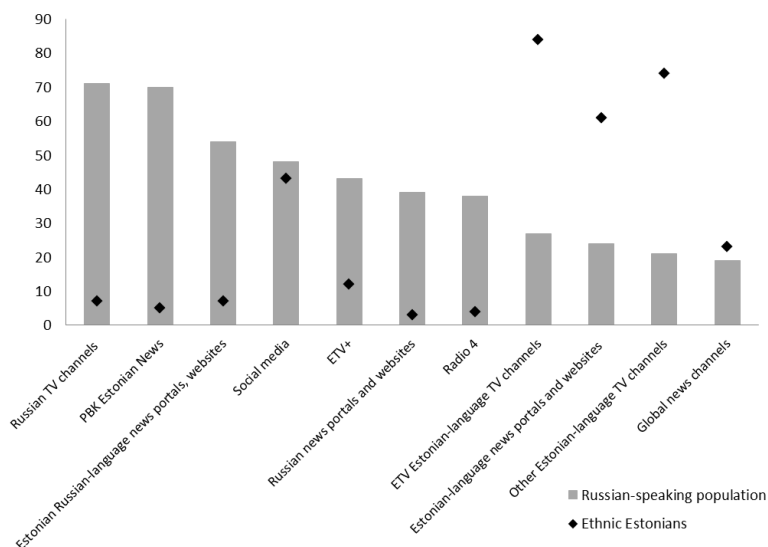


Chart 1: Media channels in order of importance for the Russian-speaking population and Estonians, percentage  
Source: Estonian Integration Monitoring (Eesti integratsiooni monitoriing) (2017)

<sup>42</sup> Baltic Media Alliance, <http://en.1bma.lv/en/about-holding/> [31 July 2018] [31 July 2018].

The latest integration monitoring report (2017) shows that Russian TV channels are considered as important sources of information for 71% of Russian speakers in Estonia. One of the two national channels of the Russian Federation, *Rossiya*, and two private channels, NTV and RTV, are the most popular Russian-based information and entertainment sources among the Russian-speaking population in Estonia. *Rossiya* states that it has a media coverage of 98.5% among the Russian population in Russia and that more than 50 million people watch the channel in CIS countries and the Baltic States.<sup>43</sup> The news programme *Vesti* is the oldest news programme on Russian television and enjoys popularity inside and outside of the country.

For a long time, the local Estonian newspaper and radio landscape was less attractive for the Russian population in Estonia compared to Russian media. Estonia National Broadcasting (ERR) and the biggest Estonian Newspapers *Eesti Päevaleht*, *Postimees* and *Eesti Ekspress* used to publish in Estonian and therefore were not consumed by many Russian-speakers. The exception was Radio 4, which belongs to ERR and was established as a Russian-language radio channel, providing qualitatively good content for the local minority. Until today, the radio station is considered as an important source of information for 38% of Russian speakers.

In early 2000 some first attempts to bring both groups together emerged. The online tabloid *Delfi* and *Rus Delfi* aimed to provide the whole of the Estonian population with the same content but in different languages. *Postimees* started their Russian version of a printed newspaper in 2005 but soon re-arranged itself as an online medium. Today, both *Rus Delfi* and *RusPostimees* are the most popular (54%) Estonian sources of information among Russian speakers in the country. To a lesser extent, the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia follows European or international media (around 19%) such as CNN or BBC – and this mostly in their Russian language versions (Estonian Integration Monitoring 2017).

Language barriers and the absence of home-based TV-productions in Russian combined with different mentalities in media consumption and contradictory attitudes towards the Estonian state (in particular regarding aspects of history) resulted in two parallel media spaces in Estonia. PBK officially aimed to fill this gap, however, its content and coverage rather followed the idea of a “Russian World”, than providing the minority group with objective, alternative information on Estonia. Russia was successful in using this gap and instrumentalising the Russian minority in Estonia by providing them with

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<sup>43</sup> Rossiya TV official web-page, [https://russia.tv/article/show/article\\_id/7481/](https://russia.tv/article/show/article_id/7481/) [31 July 2018].

negative coverage through all the above described narratives. Thus, the overall tendency can be summed up as such: the better Estonia proceeds in EU integration, the more negative the coverage of state affairs becomes.

In December 2013 a new media company – *Rossija Segodnja* (Russia Today, RT) – was created on the basis of the former *RIA Novosti* and *Golos Rossii* (The Voice of Russia). A year later the radio station *Sputnik* entered the market, spreading a positive image of Russia via radio and the internet in 35 different languages. In the Baltic countries RT has been active since 2015. However, neither RT nor *Sputnik* have been very successful in the Estonian media landscape. RT provides bad quality Estonian language texts, mostly translations, which are not considered a reputable source of information for Estonian-speakers.

With regard to news information online and social media still play a secondary role in Estonia compared to TV. However, the number of social media users has increased in recent years and, according to researchers, the tendency will grow. As for now, online and social media are considered to be important sources of information for 61% (online media) and 43% (social media) of Estonians (see chart 1). Among the Russian-speaking population online media is an important source for 54% and social media for 48% (Estonian Integration Monitoring 2017). However, a huge difference can be observed between generations. Among the younger people the rate of consumption of online and social media is as high as 90%. Among the Russian-speaking population in Estonia, both Facebook (43%) and Russian social media such as *Odnoklassniki* (33%) and *Vkontakte* (26%) are popular.

The role of social media will certainly increase even more, thus a Russian communication strategy will try to target more Russian-speaking young people through these channels. At the moment there is very little evidence and a big research gap on reliable data and case studies on Russian communication activities and possible influence via *Odnoklassniki* and *Vkontakte*. A recent research study, “Robotrolling”, conducted by NATO’s strategic Communications Center of Excellence, on the use of Twitter in the Baltic states, showed that about 63% of all Russian language posts on NATO activities in Estonia were automatically generated (NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence 2018). Facebook and Twitter monitor fake news and robotrolling and regularly delete automatically generated content. But with regard to Russian social media platforms like *Odnoklassniki* and *Vkontakte* there is a lack of information on how they deal with this issue.

## 5. Estonian resilience

2007 not only revealed a window of opportunity for the Russian leadership to continue its influence activities in the Baltic states, but it also showed the Estonian leadership their vulnerabilities. It became clear that segregated school education and different media landscapes created parallel societies in Estonia. There is a need for a common education and information space as well as a more comprehensive integration policy, which would concentrate not only on the knowledge of the official language (as the first integration policy did) but also on developing a sense of belonging to Estonia.

### 5.1 Integration of the Russian-speaking minority

The Russian-speaking minority today is no longer homogenous. After the mass riots in Tallinn in April 2007 the Estonian state re-shaped its integration policy, which supported a process of differentiation. Already in 2011 a research paper, ordered by the Estonian Ministry of Culture and conducted by private statistical companies and the University of Tartu, could clearly identify different attitudes towards the Estonian state and the Estonian population among the Russian-speaking minority. Moreover, this paper also identifies their ability to adapt to the new society and to become successful in the socio-economic structures of Estonia. Based on the integration success, five categories can be distinguished:

- Successfully integrated (21%) – mostly members of the younger generation, born and grown up in the independent Estonian Republic. They speak the Estonian language fluently and are successful on the job market. Most of them are citizens of Estonia and feel part of the Estonian society. They have trust in the state, live and work in an Estonian environment, follow Estonian media (and partially prefer it)
- Russian-speaking patriots of Estonia (16%) – middle-aged people who are not doing very well economically and whose attitudes tend to be pessimistic. They have a weak knowledge of the official language but indicate Estonia as their only homeland and are open towards ethnical Estonians.
- Russian natives and Estonian-speakers: active but critical (13%) – mostly young people, economically well-protected, speak fluent Estonian, but rarely use the official language, have most of their socio-economic ties among other Russian-speakers, they identify with other countries (including Russia) as their home and only half of them have Estonian citizenship. Although they follow Estonian media, they are critical and tend to distrust it. They are politically inactive and are ready to leave the country.

- Low-integrated (29%) – mostly Russian-speaking elderly people, unemployed or employed in low-paid sectors (working-class). Their Estonian language skills are often poor; most of them have no citizenship, often excused by their poor Estonian language skills and their incapability to learn the official language. They mistrust the state; the lack of security and general pessimism are key characteristics of this group. They usually consume the local Russian-speaking media or media of the Russian Federation.
- Passive, non-integrated (22%) – mostly elderly people, with no skills of the Estonian language, mostly living in the North-Easterly region of Estonia bordering Russia (Ida-Virumaa). Most of them are citizens of the Russian Federation. They have a lower level of education and identify strongly with Russia as their only homeland. They are socially passive and are not interested in life in Estonia and its society, their main source of information is Russian television (Estonian Integration Monitoring 2011).

The studies conducted in the last five years (among others, the Study on Integration of Social Groups (Rikmann/Himmelfeldt 2013), impact of language training development programmes (Estonian Integration and Migration Foundation 2013), the impact of participation of ethnic minorities in national cultural activities to their ethnic identity (Makarova 2017) show that a third (35%) of Russian Federation citizens living in Estonia and almost two thirds (67%) of people with non-citizenship status identify Estonia as the only home country. Russia as the only home country is seen by 42% of Russian Federation citizens, living permanently in Estonia and 16% of residents with non-citizenship. At the same time, 10% of non-ethnic Estonian citizens claim Russia to be their only home country (as opposed to 76% of the same category, who perceive Estonia as the only home country). Within the younger generation, aged between 15 and 35, 70-80% of respondents declare Estonia their only home. Belonging to Russia is seen more as a historical (Soviet) heritage through language and culture (at about 50 to 70% in all age categories) (Estonian Integration Monitoring 2011).

The success of the integration policy had a direct impact on the Russian instruments of influence. The awareness among the Russian-speaking population of the Russian policy of “compatriots” is low. About 65% of Russian-speaking Estonians claim to have little knowledge of the activity of this movement. Only 8.5% confirm their knowledge to be good (Kallas 2016). Institutions like *Rossotrudnichestvo* and the Foundation *Russkij Mir* have a limited impact in Estonia. These have little to offer for the Russian-speaking minority in Estonia. Radical pro-Russian actors such as *Nochnoj Dozor*, who strongly promote the idea of *Russkij Mir*, have a marginalised outreach with little significance in society. The

Russian Party, or *Vene Erakond Eestis* which was founded at the beginning of the 1990s to protect the interests of the Russian-speaking population, continually fails to reach 5% during elections. The fact that the Russian minority in Estonia has become so versatile makes Russian policies less successful. Current Russian activities are more likely to be successful among a smaller group of less educated and less integrated Russian-speaking people, coming from poorer regions.

Well-integrated and patriotic young people have become more and more engaged in Estonian affairs. The Estonian narrative of Russians seen as foreigners or foes has shifted. At the last TEDx Conference in March 2018 in Tallinn in Lasnamäe<sup>44</sup>, the President of Estonia, Kersti Kaljulaid spoke – in Russian – about the key to success in a free society.<sup>45</sup> This was the first time a president of an independent Estonia held a speech completely in Russian. This speech has an enormous value for the development and improvement of the Estonian-Russian relationship.

## 5.2 Institutional StratCom

At the institutional level, Estonia is aiming to achieve a sustained, institution-based and not person-based strategic communication policy. For this purpose, the governmental office under Prime Minister Jüri Ratas decided in 2017 to scale up the existing department of strategic communication. Starting from 2018, the overall budget of the department will increase from a yearly budget of EUR 60,000 to EUR 800,000 and increase its staff by an additional eight persons, which is a large increase given the fact that Estonia is a country of 1.3 million inhabitants. This department unites and coordinates the work of ministries and other public institutes, informs the public about the security situation, coordinates crisis management, exposes fake information and prevents its spread.

In addition to StratCom some ministries of Estonia created positions of Russian-speaking press officers, dealing exclusively with issues on revealing propaganda and disinformation and developing counter-activities. At the moment the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Estonian Police Department, the Ministry of Defence, the Estonian Army and Ministry of Education have created these positions. They work closely with StratCom, creating a common strategy and counter activities.

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<sup>44</sup> Mostly inhabited by Russian-speakers.

<sup>45</sup> ETV+ Media Channel, “Керсти Кальюлайд на конференции TEDxLasnamäe говорила о важности образования” (Kersti Kaljulaid spoke about the importance of education during TEDxLasnamäe Conference), available at: <https://etvpluss.err.ee/v/f89be429-fba8-440e-a58b-1cd750897e57> [31 July 2018]

### 5.3 Building regional Russian language media

One of the lessons learned from the mass riots in April 2007 was the need to reduce the information gap between the Estonian media and the negative narratives about Estonia promoted on Russian TV. It became evident that knowledge of the Estonian language is not a guarantee of consumption of Estonian media. The Russian minority in Estonia needed a professional, Estonian-based, Russian-speaking channel, which would provide this target group with information about the current affairs of Estonia.

The first attempt to launch ETV2 as a mixed-language channel, to provide information in both Estonian and Russian, took place right after the relaunch of a new integration policy in 2008. The aim of this channel was to provide a mixed-language programme, bringing both target groups closer together. The news section *Aktuaalne Kaamera* in Russian was integrated into the contents of the channel. Other broadcasts were bilingual. However, the channel did not last long. It was extremely costly to keep up a bilingual channel and the needs of both target groups were too diverse for a common production. The lack of professionalism with regard to local Russian-speaking journalists and simply boring content did not get the expected attention. Moreover, opinion polls showed a rather negative attitude among the Estonian-speaking population towards a Russian-language channel, which would be integrated into the Estonian Public Broadcasting (ERR) organisation. It was hard to explain to an ordinary Estonian tax payer, why, after the mass riots of 2007 in Tallinn, they needed to pay taxes for an additional Russian-language channel.

The conflict in Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea in 2013/14 made Estonians re-think their attitude. In 2015 a new channel, ETV+, went on air as part of ERR. The aim of the channel was to provide the Russian-speaking minority with current affairs programmes in Estonia, made by the local Russian-speaking minority. ETV2 was projected as a mixed-language channel, providing different content in different languages (Estonian, Russian and partially English), but ETV+ aims to approach a Russian-speaking audience, providing content produced in Estonia in Russian. At the moment, three years after the launch of the channel, it is too early to evaluate the success or failure of the channel. According to interviewed experts for this study, the establishment of a TV channel and breaking habits in media consumption takes about ten years' time. As for now, the expert opinion on the work of ETV+ is divided. Some experts claim that ETV+ does not achieve its aim, since the majority of the Russian-speaking population still relies on Russian sources. On the other hand, other experts indicate that the number of people watching *Aktuaalne Kaamera* in Russian has doubled. According to statistics of the integration moni-



toring report 2017, about 62% of the Russian-speaking minority follow *Aktuaalne Kaamera*. About 70% of the Russian-speaking population indicates that the launch of ETV+ was important (Estonian Integration Monitoring 2017).

The small budget of ERR, limited proficiency of local journalists and a narrow outreach are obstacles for further development of the channel. It is not aiming to compete with Russian channels, which have completely different budgets and resources. The aim of the channel is rather to increase ownership among the Russian-speaking population in Estonia, challenging the victim-narrative and giving them an opportunity to create their own product, to be involved actively in Estonian social and political life.

#### 5.4 German and European contribution

Out of all member states and allies of Estonia, most contributions come from the United States, the UK, Sweden, Norway and Germany.<sup>46</sup> Mostly the embassies of these countries support activities aimed to strengthen the role of civil society and promote European integration. Language courses, youth summer camps, the development of local initiatives in the regions, youth exchanges and networking are the main areas of foreign activities in Estonia. The UK and Germany contribute to the development of the media landscape in Estonia, aiming to increase its professionalism and outreach and to strengthen the networks of journalists on an informal level.

Although the areas of foreign contribution by the Nordic Embassies, the UK, Germany and USA are similar, their approaches towards the target groups are different. The USA and UK work exclusively on projects with the Russian-speaking population in Estonia, aiming to minimise their vulnerabilities by addressing their direct needs. For the sustainable development of a TV channel it is extremely important to have a well-equipped studio (for general attractiveness of the medium), be technically advanced and have professionals working on both content and technology. Together with British support ETV+ has built a new studio. BBC One provides Russian-speaking journalists in Estonia with capacity-building trainings. In particular, this means gaining practical experience on how to work in production, to film, to work with modern technologies etc.

Nordic countries are also closely involved in the production process of ETV+'s own formats. The Nordic Council of Ministers' Office in Estonia contributes to a development

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<sup>46</sup> The order of countries does not indicate the dimension of the financial contribution.

of a local comic series named *Lasnogorsk*<sup>47</sup>. The idea of the series is to initiate, in a comical way, a self-reflecting public debate on how Russians or Russian-speaking Estonians see themselves, their integration and future in Estonia. The series can be compared with the German series *Türkisch für Anfänger*.

Germany promotes an inclusive approach, building bridges not only with the minority group, but involving Estonians and stressing the need for multilateral cooperation. Combined projects among different ethnical groups (Estonian, Russian-speaking and German) and civil society actors (NGOs, foundations, activists, and media representatives) strengthen intercultural exchange on the institutional as well as on a personal level and build a basis of mutual understanding.

To increase media competence, Germany supports the Estonian media in two ways: it aims to create a network of journalists from Estonia and Germany, and it organises a number of workshops and seminars within this network on improving the quality of journalism. To this end, the German Embassy in Estonia initiated 2-3 day study tours to the two capitals Tallinn and Berlin for five Estonian and five German journalists. During the study tours, the journalists visited various state institutions and media outlets, participated in workshops on newsroom and/or modern radio production and strengthened the multi-/crossmedia partnership with German leading broadcasters (dpa, RBB, BR, SWR, Radio Bremen, ZDF and DW). According to the feedback of the Estonian participants from the newspaper *Eesti Päevaleht* and *Postimees*, this experience is particularly valuable for them, since they receive an opportunity to step into a conversation with German stakeholders and get a deeper insight into German politics. Both journalists stated, during an interview in May 2018 in Tallinn, that they were able to widen their knowledge and understanding of the German political mindset and broaden their sustainable professional network. As a positive result of the visit, both Estonian journalists increased their understanding of the recent cyber-attacks on the German parliament and used their knowledge in their everyday work back in Estonia. On the other hand, German journalists, as in the case of Radio Bremen, learned about innovative digital technologies in Estonia and used the know-how of local journalists in Estonia for creating programmes with a relatively small budget, which they afterwards implemented in Germany.

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<sup>47</sup> A play on words with “Lasna” and “Gorsk” referring to a Russian-speaking district in Tallinn, similar to “Charlottengrad” in Berlin.

*Deutsche Welle* (DW) is another valuable partner for ERR. DW provides ERR with a set of its own content (documentaries, series etc.), which helps to fill the broadcasting programme of the TV-channels on the one hand, and sets free a relatively small Estonian broadcasting budget for new projects on the other hand.

Particularly important are the German support of ERR and the cooperation of Estonian Television (ETV) and the Russian-speaking Television channel ETV+. By using an inclusive approach, Germany strengthens the cooperation of different editorial teams. Given the fact that Estonian broadcasting is divided by language criteria and by the independence of editorial teams from each other in their decision-making and everyday work, there is a lack of exchange of content, format and experience between Estonian and Russian-speaking journalists. Partially, it is due to different needs and perceptions of the content by recipients. According to interviewed media experts, ethnic Estonians are used to a TV story of 7-8 minutes length, whereas the Russian-speaking consumer needs a more dynamic plot of maximum 4-5-minutes. Therefore, content exchange between the editorials is rather difficult, since both productions reach different needs of their target groups and need to use different instruments. On the other hand, the development of Russian language media and its integration into ERR structures was not a priority for a long time. This has further implications on the mindset of journalists, simply not thinking of the necessity of such cooperation. The old narrative was to integrate the Russian-speaking minority into Estonian society by teaching them the language and culture, which would automatically lead to an increase of Estonian media consumption and their participation in society. However, successful knowledge of the Estonian language is not the only indicator for successful integration. Minority media was and is partially still today, less developed and less professional compared to Estonian media.

## 6. Conclusions

A strong shift in Russian communication strategy can be identified over the last ten years. Estonia is no longer an explicit target of Russian disinformation. Rather, it is an element of the whole “package” of influence measures directed towards the EU. Russian actors are studying the weaknesses of the EU member states and playing them out against the EU. The way Russia builds its disinformation strategy, mixing facts and fakes, distracting the recipient from the actual problems and misleading their attention to minor issues exaggerated in the media as well as using new technologies (trolls, bots etc.) poses a serious challenge to liberal democracy value-based societies in Europe. In Estonia the Russian minority is the most vulnerable group when it comes to Russian propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Partially, Russian media are successful in spreading Russian narra-

tives and achieving the support of the local minority group. This, however, does not pose a serious security threat to the Estonian state and a mass riot scenario similar to that of 2007 is not likely anymore. A crucial part of the success of Estonia's counter measures against Russian disinformation is the improvement of the integration and education policy towards the Russian minority. To recognise them as a part of Estonian society and to integrate them into the Estonian information space is an important way to counter Russia's impact on this group.

Pushing a pro-European narrative among the Russian minority would be counter-productive in Estonia, since they would probably perceive this as an act of "brainwashing" or counterpropaganda. What Europeans can and should do, is: i) increase awareness of the problem of existing and skilfully targeted propaganda and disinformation campaigns in our own home-countries, ii) strengthen resilience within our own societies and promote cooperation among the member-states, iii) strengthen the role of media literacy and media ethics (transparency and fact-based coverage).

## **7. Appendix: List of participating institutions**

- German Embassy in Estonia
- Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Estonian Ministry of Social Affairs
- Estonian Defence Ministry
- University of Tartu
- Narva College of the University of Tartu
- International Center for Defence and Security
- Newspaper "Postimees"
- Journal Diplomaatia
- Newspaper "Eesti Päevaleht"
- Governmental office, StratCom department
- ETV+ editorial
- National Estonian Broadcasting (ERR)
- Member of the Estonian Parliament, IRL party

#### **IV. Comparison and conclusion *by Stefan Meister***

A fundamental difference between both countries is that while in Estonia the government and society are aware of Russian influence and disinformation campaigns and are the key partner who demand external support from the EU, in Serbia many government actors are playing the pro-Russian card and benefitting from business with Russian companies. While Estonia is a member of the EU and NATO and an overall majority of society supports the idea of liberal democracy and market economy, in Serbia it is still an open question, when the membership towards the EU will come and if the ruling elites are really interested in the transformation towards democracy, rule of law and a market economy. Serbian government representatives do not only closely cooperate with Russian state institutions they also promote Serbian nationalism and Slavic brotherhood with Russia. Playing the Russia card and anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiments are very common in the ruling party or their nationalistic partners. As a result, the key partners for Russian information campaigns and influencers are in the government and in leading media. While in Estonia civil society, journalists and state actors are key partners in countering Russian propaganda and disinformation, in Serbia this role is taken up nearly exclusively by non-state actors while ruling elites use narratives of Russian propaganda.

The political and social situation in Serbia challenges any external activities from EU member states in the field of information policy with regard to their credibility. The number of partners for counter-measures is much smaller in Serbia than in Estonia and these actors are much weaker. Even worse, the public and political environment is becoming increasingly EU- and NATO-critical and might be hostile against external influence. At the same time, there is a need to increase information activities by the EU to counter false information and stereotypes in Serbian society which are supported by Russian and Serbian propaganda. We have to bear in mind that Germany still has a positive image in Serbia and with its economic and social activities it has soft power in the country, which can be better used in the information sphere. To show and explain German and EU activities in and benefits for Serbia can be positive for the image of the values the German government and the EU promote.

Therefore, if one wants to counter Russian propaganda and disinformation in both countries one needs different strategies and narratives. While Estonian society seems to be pretty resilient against Russian disinformation campaigns, the EU is losing ground in Serbia. In Estonia the main vulnerable target group is the Russian-speaking minority, in Serbia it is more or less the whole of society and especially the young generation. These two case studies show that the better state institutions function, the higher the trust is in

the state and media. Moreover, if the state interacts with civil society it is easier to respond to attacks in the information sphere. This means, a successful counter-communication strategy needs to be in line with a policy of strengthening institutions and good governance. An isolated information strategy will not be successful.

The success story of Russian propaganda and disinformation in Serbia is based on the vulnerable political, economic and social environment. In Serbian society Russia has a positive image which is based on historical ties but also emotions in the context of the Serbian failure in the Yugoslavian wars in the 1990s. Furthermore, a Russophile base in politics, media and the public is directly spreading Russian disinformation. This is completely the opposite to Estonia, where Russian activities are first of all seen as a security threat and the independence from the Soviet Union is guaranteed only by EU and NATO membership for a majority of the society. Estonian elites have understood that they need to integrate the Russian-speaking minority, invest in education and address these groups with media and information which are in line with their media behaviour.

A key question for the manipulation of the public sphere is media ownership and the independence of media. While in Serbia media is underfunded and is largely dependent on business people close to the government, in Estonia independent state media plays a bigger role. Free media content has become important to the business model of especially local and regional media outlets. A strong focus in the conclusion is on the support of local and regional media which is so far not the aim of foreign funding. The quality of Russian media and Russian-funded media is much better in Serbia than in Estonia which has something to do with the language and priority of funding. Larger funding of Russian activities in Serbia compared to Estonia means that in the view of Russian decision-makers the success of the Russian campaign is more likely and Serbia a more important and easier target. At the same time, in Estonia the main target groups are the Russian speakers, who watch Russian state TV anyway. It makes no sense to invest heavily in Russian foreign media outlets in such a country.

Whereas in Serbia the funding should be concentrated on non-state actors, this is different to Estonia, where state and non-states actors cooperate much closer. It is important for both countries to have less bureaucratised and more flexible funding instruments and to improve the coordination among EU member states.

**There are more general conclusions which can be taken from both studies:**

- The media are at the heart of democratic societies, worldwide, they are undergoing a credibility crisis as a result of a business-model crisis in the context of the digital revolution. Transparency about sources of information is crucial; therefore, it is important to improve the quality of media and investigative journalism. There is a need to invest in the analysis of disinformation, fake news, and cyberattacks worldwide, and to explain to societies how disinformation works. It is crucial to reveal and make propaganda structures visible. This is a task not just of the media, think tanks and the expert community, but also of politicians and civil society. To invest in the quality of independent journalism is crucial for any activity in the information sphere.
- Much of the success of Russian disinformation is due to the vulnerabilities of the societies it targets. While in Estonia it is the lack of integration of the Russian minority and the division of this group in the education system, in Serbia it is the lack of clarity of the political and social transformation as well as the instrumentalisation of nationalistic sentiments and frustration in society by the political elites. Societies and governments need to do their homework in terms of reforms, social demands, and the roots of growing populism. Many of their vulnerabilities are homemade and can be solved only by societies and elites themselves. Strengthening resilience also means improving education, media literacy, strong, pluralistic media, our own narratives and active communication. In Serbia the EU integration process and funding instruments should be used as conditionality for the improvement of the environment for civil society, media and the legal system.
- There is a need for a comprehensive, joint approach and response among the EU member states. To learn from each other, to study and compare different cases can help to better understand own vulnerabilities and learn counter-measures from others. It is crucial to improve the coordination of counter-measures with political institutions and civil society nationally, and also among the member states and the institutions of the EU, and to strengthen those institutions at the EU- and NATO-level that deal with these issues. Institutions like the EU's StratCom are currently underfunded and lack the mandate to become a crucial and credible player in the creation of counter-measures. It might make sense to change the role of this institution to collect and coordinate information from the EU member states. But for this purpose, the EU's StratCom needs to become more operational.

- In countries like Serbia, an isolated information strategy makes no sense. It is important to combine the support of transformation and reforms with more EU (communication) presence in the country. Here an active EU ambassador is vital and improved coordination among EU-member states' representatives in the respective country – in terms of a communication strategy and for countering Russian propaganda – would be easy first steps. It is important that the society has the impression EU-member states care about the future of Serbia, which has been successfully communicated in Estonia by German officials before and after its accession to the EU. These studies underline that there is a need to understand the particular political, social and historical environment to address a successful communication strategy towards a country. This environment will define the room for manoeuvre in which EU member states can act. To transfer the same instruments and narratives from one country to another can be counter-productive. The Russian information campaign is a good case study to understand how this adaptation can take place successfully.



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## Understanding Russian Communication Strategy

### Case Studies of Serbia and Estonia

*“There is a need to invest in the analysis of disinformation, fake news, and cyber attacks worldwide, and to explain to societies how disinformation works. It is crucial to reveal and make propaganda structures visible. This is a task not just of the media, the think tanks and the expert community, but also of politicians and civil society.”*

As a part of Russian soft (or coercive) power disinformation and propaganda have become key elements in Russian security policy since 2012/13.

This study analyses Russia’s communication strategy with regard to its influence in Serbia and Estonia. What are the tools that are used? What are the aims behind disinformation and fake news stories?

It shows that a formerly reactive response from a perceived position of weakness has turned into a well-executed communication strategy that makes use of vulnerabilities to sow discord. National elites in the target countries play a key role for the success or failure of this policy.